



Essays on The Value of Public Service

**Distributed During an Alliance for Innovation Manager's Forum Webinar
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*I can assure you, public service is a stimulating, proud and lively enterprise. It is not just a way of life,
it is a way to live fully. Lee H. Hamilton*

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The Alliance for Innovation is conducting an essay project on the Value of Public Service. This is a work in progress which began with the inspiring article written by Randy Reid, County Manager, Alachua County, FL on the Value of Public Service. We hope you will be inspired to share your thoughts on why public service matter. Please submit your essay to content@transformgov.org.

The Value of Public Service

By Randall Reid, County Manager, Alachua County, FL

We find ourselves today as public sector leaders working in an era of dynamic global economics, stormy political discourse and facing yet another crisis in confidence in our public institutions. Memories of 9-11 sacrifices of public servants have faded as we debate the causes of our national afflictions, diminished financial security and face the current rhetoric frequently condemning the public sector. That said, I continue to feel an undiminished pride in working as a professional in local government. I know my jurisdiction, like the ones many of you work for, have a brighter economic future and are kinder and gentler places because of the personal investment and labor of public employees. My jurisdiction, perhaps like yours, is blessed with innovative, dedicated and creative public employees and our community is recognized by the innovation in our programs and excellence of our public academic and healthcare institutions. Thanks to the actions of our citizens thru public programs, the natural beauty of our countryside remains intact and protected and our economy is rebounding. The collaboration and work of many people makes these community achievements possible: people in both the private and public sectors. It is folly to think that only the private sector strives for obtainment of excellence or causes our communities to achieve it. The role of public employees and the value of public service is vital to our republic and the success of our communities.

Public sector employees are not the “non producers” of the currently popular Ayn Rand’s “Atlas Shrugged” worldview. The public sector serves a three-fold vital role as the provider of public goods, guardians of the commons and promoters a civic life essential to our communities. Private sector organizations while effective community partners, can be trusted to desire to do so only to the extent they can commercialize it for profit or create positive branding through their actions.

Early in my career as a manager I was influenced by a book, “Reinventing Government,” not with just the examples of change oriented, transformational management I had learned under my first boss and coauthor, Ted Gaebler, but most of all by five principles outlined in the preface of the book. This book, critical of government bureaucracies, stated that first, as practitioners, we must strive to preserve in this era our fundamental belief in democratic government. Secondly, we must believe that a civilized society cannot function effectively without “effective” government and we make that effectiveness a reality each day to the degree we can attain it. Thirdly, we must believe that those dedicated employees around us working in government are not the problem as much as the bureaucratic systems in which we are to this day forced to work in that are the principle problem with government. Fourthly, we must believe that neither traditional liberalism nor conservatism has much relevance to the problems that our governments face today and there exists a need for pragmatic and non ideological solutions. Finally we must commit to provide equal opportunity for all of our citizens to prosper and reach their potential. These thoughts continue to serve me now in this time of public criticism of local government and continue to motivate me through periods of frustration in my public service.

Response to public sector critics must be viewed as a teachable moment and a time for civic education. In our comments and speeches, we need to recognize with humility our organizational shortcomings and explain those essential inefficiencies within public processes that represent the conflicting yet important values we adhere to as a democracy. Most importantly we must boldly and unabashedly defend the public sector’s role in defending the “commons” and the competency and value of those individuals employed or called to public service. I suggest that public employees, whether as a Commissioner sitting at the dais or a member of a road construction crew, devote their lives to making local places better places for all our citizens. They are not nameless, faceless bureaucrats living in faraway places. They are your neighbors, and your friends. They sit next to you in your place of worship. They have families. They pay taxes.

They are the customers in your businesses and the volunteers in your favorite organizations. They are fellow citizens of our community and it is their honor and passion to serve you. They do not grow rich in doing so, as a narrowing minority continues to do in the private sector, but they serve you well and deserve your respect.

In my experience, our public sector peers start off each morning with a totally different set of fundamental questions in their minds than our private sector counterparts in community life, who must measure their profit margins and commercial viability. Many of our public employees start every day with the well-being of the entire community in mind and specific issues essential to community prosperity and health they must grapple. Sometimes these seem like Don Quixote assaults on society's broken institutions. They ask important questions and develop strategies to solve increasingly complex community problems. Questions considered by the private sector are tangential or seek a nexus to community problems only if they can commercialize the opportunity, profit off the commons or assist their corporate branding by association to community building efforts. Corporate loyalty to a specific place is a dying value in today's global or absentee businesses ownership.

Public employees ask humane questions such as if anyone is going hungry today? Are citizens in danger because of temperature extremes? How can we help keep citizens healthy? Is someone in despair because of illness but unable to afford treatment? Is a veteran feeling lost and isolated? Does a victim of violent crime need assistance? Can a non-profit organization help tend to those in need? Did a person's race prevent them from renting a home?

Public employees plan for a better future for their communities. They plan for the benefits of their citizens and preservation of historical places while balancing the impact of new development. We ask what our communities will look like in fifty years. Are we building safe structures? Can we grow in a way that creates a sustainable future? What will transportation look like as gasoline costs increase? Can we use energy more wisely? Will there be farms here in the future or only houses? Will future generations have access to our beautiful wild spaces?

Public employees ask if precious natural systems and our environment that undergirds our communities are safe. Are our water supplies and air quality healthy? Are we safe from exposure to dangerous toxins? How do we dispose of dangerous chemicals? How can we assist parents prevent childhood obesity?

Public employees ask questions out of concern for our citizen's quality of life and public safety. This quality of life focus is a clear responsibility of the public realm and makes for sustainable and resilient businesses and neighborhoods. How can we improve our transportation infrastructure? How can we pay for a park or fire station? How can we encourage business retention? Can we recycle more and limit non renewable resource use? How do we best respond to the devastation of a fire, a hurricane, a medical emergency? How do we make our neighborhoods safe? Are there safe alternatives to jail and long term incarceration?

Public employees ask if we have responsibly enhanced our democratic ideals and sufficiently gathered citizen concerns on important issues. Have we made our government more accessible to all people? Have we responded to citizen questions in a helpful and timely way? Are we providing civic education opportunities and forums for civic conversations, as well as formal public hearings and processes? Do we properly engage citizens in problem solving or have we made them only consumers of our services?

As ethical public managers and employees we need to listen to our critics closely and respectfully as citizens and concentrate on fiscal accountability, effective governance and outstanding performance at each of our public tasks and responsibilities. We must, however, never dismiss the fact that what we do as public employees is essential to the functioning of our communities and the welfare of our citizenry. If we work hard, treat our elected officials, peers and

our citizens with respect and civility, we can answer any question and respond to any challenge our communities face. We can bring honor back to public service and attract a new generation to public service.

These are the Days

Katy Simon, County Manager, Washoe County, NV

They start like any other day...those days when you are reminded, sometimes painfully, of why you have given your life to public service.

It may be a plane crash that calls upon every first responder resource you have for miles, or the team response to a mentally unstable gunman taking innocent people hostage, or an adoption ceremony in which a group of siblings that have been abused by their meth-addicted parents have finally found a permanent, loving home...These are the days that make us proud. They are the days when all the training, all the difficult resource decisions, all the criticisms, and all the frustrations of conflicting policies and ideologies somehow converge to lift you up and focus your attention on what it means to be in public service in America today.

There are too many days now when we have to have the painful conversations that responsible leaders cannot turn away from..."I'm sorry, but we are going to have to eliminate your position. We just can't get the funding together. I know you've been an outstanding resource to our organization for (fill in the number—5? 10? 15? 20?) years, and we are deeply grateful for your service, but we just don't have the budget to keep you on." And there are the days when frustrated citizens, some of whom haven't had work in many months, take out their anger on their local government leaders..."You've got to do more! People need jobs, and need their dignity restored! How would you know...you HAVE a job and a pension that I PAY FOR!!" Or the days when neighborhoods and advocacy groups fight for more of the budget pie for their priority at the expense of others..."You can't cut the Senior Bingo group! It's the only thing that our respected elders have to look forward to during the week! Cut the (fill in the blank) program first, or while you are at it, why don't you reduce the wages of your employees! We hear they are paid much more than private sector folks who are doing the same job!!"

We don't begrudge anyone who finds the seemingly endless assaults on public service to be more than they can bear, and leaves our professional family. It's understandable. But we celebrate those who stay, because what we do is noble work...work with dignity...work with integrity. What we do requires that we remember that SERVING OTHERS, and putting their needs above our own, is always Job One. Whether that means patiently helping a senior citizen understand the limits to how we can help them with problems with their mortgage or their Social Security payments, or whether it means filling sandbags during a flood, or taking food to the firefighters on the line in a wildfire, or insuring that neighbors are trained and made aware of how they can help each other in an emergency until we can get there, our duty is to lift other people up, to empower them to be and do and dream whatever they are capable of.

What other job can one name that provides the chance to impact thousands of people's lives for the good on a daily basis? What else could one do that would put to the test, every day, one's commitment to the values of honesty...and respect...and fairness...and tolerance...and innovation...and compassion? Only in public service do we get to show up every single day, challenged to be our best for other people in every single decision, every single action, every single hour.

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something, and I will not fail to do the something that I can do." – Helen Keller

Today and every day, let's celebrate the people who serve. We cannot do everything, but we can do something, and we will not fail to do the something that we can do.

The Power of Public Service

By Janet and Bob Denhardt, Professors, Arizona State University

Though it's been ten years, we remember well the tragic events of September 11, 2001. As we look back on that day, we recognize that we initially went through a period of disbelief, unable to process and accept what we were seeing over and over on the television screen. The scenes were baffling at first and though we found ourselves watching them repeatedly, we didn't really comprehend what was happening. Later in the day, the tragedy began to become more personal - names and faces began to replace the surreal images that seemed almost impossible in their horror. As that happened, grief and sorrow for the people whose lives were ended in a fury of violence and hatred began to well up inside. We cried.

As these scenes became more personal to us, we also began to think about the many who reached out to their fellow citizens, especially the thousands of public servants who walked and ran toward the unimaginable to help. A most enduring image for us is the story told by several of those struggling down the stairs of the World Trade Center to escape death. "As we were trying to get down, we met police officers and fire fighters going up - and we clapped and cheered. Now we know that those same brave souls almost surely perished in the collapse of the building."

As hard as it is to understand planes flying into buildings, it's also hard to understand the motives of these courageous men and women, who literally walked through fire to try to save and protect the lives of others. Some of them died. Some were badly hurt. Even those who were not physically damaged were injured in way that is fundamentally different from the injuries suffered by those of us who watched from the safe distance of a television newscast. Although many of us would like to think that their uniforms and training somehow protected them from the all the terror, pain, and horror that we would feel, it did not. It prepared them, but it didn't shield them.

In the end, they are human just like us. While their uniforms and equipment may partially obscure their individuality, each of them has a name and a story. Each has families, friends, dreams, fears. They love and laugh, work and play, talk and walk just like us. They are every bit as vulnerable as we are.

Yet, on September 11, these people showed America, once again, that they stand apart. What makes them different is their quiet, often anonymous heroism. They are public servants. They serve their fellow citizens in a way that many people would find very difficult if not impossible to understand. How could they be so courageous? So selfless? How can we understand their heroism? The answer to these questions goes to the very soul of the public service. Yes, it was their job. Yes, they were trained. Yes, they were well equipped physically and mentally for the tasks they had to perform. But that does not diminish the nobility, the honor, or the sacrifice of their actions. Nor should it detract from our gratitude and our respect.

In a peculiar way, this ghastly act of terrorism reminds us of why we are in the public service. We care about our country, our community, and our neighbors. Each of us, whether we wear a uniform, a suit, a jacket, coveralls, or a hard hat, plays a role in improving the lives of others,. Service to the public - helping people in trouble, making the world safer and cleaner, helping children learn and prosper, literally going where others would not go - is our job and our calling.

The image of police officers and firefighters going up those stairs is compelling. But even more compelling is the larger and more pervasive power of public service. Those in law enforcement, in transportation, in health care, and in dozens of other fields at the federal, state, and local level have made untold sacrifices over the months and years following September 11 in order to respond to these events and to make this world a better place for our citizens. This ability to be selfless, to be open to the needs and values and wants of others, is a part of each public servant. And it's a part of who we are that shouldn't require effort, or even tragedy for us to recognize or acknowledge. We need not wait for such events to awaken our sense of humanity and respect. As these events have once again shown, service to the public is indeed a proud and noble profession.

(The original version of this commentary was published in September of 2001 by the American Society for Public Administration.)

In Service to Public Servants

By Tracy Miller, Florida Regional Director, Alliance for Innovation

Smart, compassionate, loyal, ethical, committed. These are the adjectives I use to describe the local government professionals I have come to know. For the last eighteen years I have had the honor to serve these outstanding public servants as a resource and friend while they face the challenges of leading our communities in both good times and bad times.

In our role at the Alliance for Innovation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization serving local government organizations, we assist with the development of innovative solutions to problems facing local communities. But in truth, we are only on the fringe of progress while the real work of community advancement is done from inside the trenches.

Today's local government professionals are astute at solving problems and they see many each day. From the complex long term funding issues to the emergency crisis of the moment, these professionals are steadfast in doing what needs to be done to protect and serve their communities.

You do not have to wonder as a citizen if you will have clean water to your home, or street lights that operate, or an ambulance when you dial 911. These have become givens in our lives and it is largely due to the stewards of our public dollars who balance the needs of the people they serve.

What I find particularly frustrating is we are living in a political climate that oftentimes creates blockades in our ability to acknowledge the work these public servants do. There is an air of distrust and in some cases genuine disgust for the work of local government professionals. And while I sympathize with the position of citizens who have been disenchanted with government either rightfully or wrongfully, what I can nearly guarantee is they are not completely aware of the environment that allows them to take for granted the benefits they enjoy because of government, while they rant against it.

Balancing the needs of the many is a complex task, and even the most astute public servants make mistakes. But more often than not, these individuals stand by their duty to do their absolute best for all and do their job in making difficult choices that frequently will not please everyone. For those that work at the local level, they have an especially delicate connection to those they serve. Seeing the people who both benefit or take issue with your decisions at the grocery store or in the neighborhood park creates a more intimate and vulnerable relationship.

What I believe is when you get to know today's local public servants leaders you will find they are a different breed of professional. These are people not interested in becoming rich, but making an honorable wage while they are doing a meaningful job. It provides an opportunity for them to support their families while doing work that makes a difference.

Our public servants are as capable and intelligent as their counterparts in the private sector, but how they are unique is their willingness to forego personal gain in light of making the world a better place. They seek out meaning over profit. It may sound "Pollyannaish", but I assure you that this depiction is reality.

And in the case of the leaders within local government, in large part they are the epitome of ethics, morality and skill. The leaders can find it difficult to serve a local elected body while trying to balance the interests of their employees and the community as a whole.

For the local government manager there is an ethical code that precludes personal politics from entering their decision making process. The manager has to operate without political influence in their work of carrying out the will of the elected body who represent the people. And in an ever changing political environment, this is akin to hitting a bullseye on a moving target while blindfolded.

Oftentimes the local government manager is the easy target of blame for real and sometimes manifested issues that are too complex than any one person can be responsible for. And when those issues become politicized these managers become the scapegoat but still accept what has happened to them with grace and honor. They leave their post and hand the job to the next professional to come along, all the while doing their very best not to dismantle the integrity of their community, their staffs and themselves.

I am talking about a unique breed of people. Able and willing to sacrifice themselves for the ideals they are most passionate about. Able and willing to make sacrifices for the communities they are citizens of as well.

If you are a public servant, especially those at the local level please accept my heartfelt thank you for doing one of the most difficult jobs in a modern society. Your work too often goes unnoticed, and this is a chance to acknowledge your efforts. You exhibit many of the qualities I admire and respect and you deserve the appreciation of those that you serve.

When you meet a person who holds a post as a public servant, my hope is you can shake their hand and respect their commitment to do their very best for you. Remember our public servants are human, they make mistakes but with only a few exceptions you can be assured they take the job seriously and are doing their very best to carry out the best interest of all. But most importantly, remember these people are your neighbors. They have hearts that are genuine and loyal and should be honored even if you disagree with their decisions.

And lastly, for those people who may be considering a job as a public servant I say go for it! Your riches will not be measured in dollars but rather in your sense of pride and honor for the guarantees you are able to provide the people you serve.

Honoring Public Employees

By Jack Schluckebier, Guest Columnist (Florida Today) & City Manager, City of Melbourne, FL

Dedicated workers provide invaluable services

As we approach the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy, our thoughts will go to those in public service who gave their lives that day.

It also is worth pausing to consider the contributions made by those who are involved in our local public services. As one with substantial experience in public administration and management, I would like to offer a perspective on the topic.

First, we should always attempt to encourage and support the individuals who comprise our public service workforce. Those in public safety are perhaps the most recognizable.

Others range from teachers and hospital workers to those in parks and recreation, in streets and in utilities. They include the individuals who document the revenues and expenditures, who inspect buildings and who undertake planning and decision making for public programs.

Secondly, we can recognize that public service is an honorable cause. It is respectable employment, providing essential services and products.

Most of the 800-plus full-time employees at the city of Melbourne are career individuals. Slightly more than half have already served the public for more than 20 years. The vast majority of their work requires specialized training and expertise, and they must be available 24/7. The community also benefits from the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and dozens of part-time employees.

Thirdly, unlike most work, public service is undertaken within full view. It is subject to scrutiny by regulatory agencies of the state and federal governments as well as the courts, along with other reviews such as internal evaluations and external audits.

Most decisions and services are subject to the wishes of citizens, reflecting their unique perspectives as residents, property owners, parents, business owners and taxpayers.

Scrutiny by the press also is a constant, as Florida is the most transparent state in the country with respect to government meetings and records through its Sunshine Law.

Fourth, public-service employees must deal with social and financial circumstances that seem to be changing faster than most of us can easily comprehend. Yet, public services tend to change slowly.

These realities can result in conflict, and even the efforts to evolve services can create unanticipated problems. All citizens can participate in this process by offering support as well as guidance.

Public employees are honorable, energetic, creative and dedicated. We should applaud their service and try to support them with competitive pay and benefits, and recognize exemplary service. These are people who willingly serve the public day in and day out, sometimes through difficult and challenging circumstances.

As you think about the 9/11 tragedy, please also consider how you regard those in public service, whether it is the public servant who lives down the block, the person next to you in church, a family member, or someone you encounter when you are out and about.

Regarding those people with kindness has no out-of-pocket cost to you, and can offer benefits to them that are priceless.

Schluckebier is city manager of Melbourne. This article was reprinted with permission from FloridaToday newspaper.

The Value of Public Service and Why

By Terrence R. Moore, ICMA-CM, City Manager, Morgantown, West Virginia

The famous quote by America's thirty-fifth president, John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" well embodies and supports inspiration for entering public service. The decisions for those of us who've decided to dedicate our lives to public service have made commitments to this effect for a number of reasons. For me, the inspiration to do so began as a child on Chicago's Southside – unfortunately, in a segregated, low income neighborhood that experienced minimal capital improvements and/or investments. Such was reflected in broken sidewalks traveled, prevalent graffiti and urban decay of both residential neighborhoods and commercial districts. To accompany this environment, many of us young people who were raised in these surroundings experienced a tremendous lack of encouragement to reach beyond the limits of our circumstances - supported by various tenets that we were not as worthy as other individuals from more affluent backgrounds, and therefore would not amount to much more than existing conditions and resulting lack of opportunities would allow.

As an elementary school student at the time that I began to experience this realization, I wasn't exactly sure as to what I could do to help improve the situation. However, I knew instinctively that it wasn't fair to be asked to continue to support such a predicament. As a motivated individual, whose only confidence was secured by performing well in school academically, as well as via extracurricular activities, I soon discovered one of the most valuable contributions made and offered by the public sector – the public library. I personally deemed public libraries as tremendous assets to communities because, for the first time in my life, I was able to truly transcend the structurally imposed limitations – by exposing myself to greater levels of reading and research, thereby, exposing myself to the rest of America and the world – via encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses, periodicals and other forms of literature. From these experiences, I was able to learn about the role many great Americans played in helping to advance public service contributions in cities. This engagement, coupled with the conditions of my surroundings (inspired by the need for a more equally responsive approach to help improve communities), eventually cultivated a desire to enter public service professionally.

It was during my high school years that I began to embrace and learn heavily about the role and function of public service. Not simply just basic knowledge of local, state and federal government organizational and political structure, which typically comprised the curriculum of civic and social studies courses offered by the Chicago Public School System at the time. I actually became inspired to learn more about the internal workings of day-to-day operations of well lead communities after reading a late 1940s directive published by the International City Managers Association (ICMA – the predecessor name of the current International City/County Management Association) during my senior year that essentially defined the requisite educational requirements for a future city manager. Prior to the 1950s, the primary function of small to medium sized cities appeared to be the development and expansion of infrastructure to accommodate both vehicular and pedestrian activity in neighborhoods. As such, city managers of these jurisdictions typically enjoyed background in civil engineering and other related fields. However, progressive movements on part of both ICMA and universities nationwide correctly predicted that this role and function would be expanded to require municipal chief executives to have backgrounds in such areas as finance, economics, personnel management, organization leadership and development, and city planning. Graduate schools of public administration throughout the United States likewise began to revise curriculums to reflect this vision. "Wow, it is possible to secure a public sector leadership position without the benefit of political connections and/or a certain family pedigree," I thought after this research. By the time I entered undergraduate school, I was both motivated and anxious to proceed with the necessary career and graduate school education path – to yield a dream and vision to someday become a well-trained, capable and dedicated city manager to serve various localities across America.

The aforementioned vision and inspiration ultimately lead to positions with the City of Chicago, Illinois and the City of Peoria, Illinois, followed by an assistant city manager role with the City of Deerfield Beach, Florida – all throughout the 1990s during my twenties. Key achievements in these capacities served me very well for the solid city manager career I

continue to enjoy today. Interestingly, however, many attempts were made by both media and residents to some degree, to offer less focus on my qualifications and training upon being hired as a city manager, and in exchange, devoted energy on what I consider to be less important matters such as age and ethnicity. For instance, upon joining the City of Sebastian, Florida in 1999 to serve as that community's city manager, much attention was directed concerning my age – having just celebrated my 29th birthday one week after the Sebastian City Council concluded its selection process. Additionally, upon appointment as Las Cruces, New Mexico City Manager (February 2005) and Morgantown, West Virginia (December 2010), various comments were offered publicly about my becoming the first African-American city manager in both states respectively. The adjectives “trailblazer” and “pioneer” were often communicated during speaking engagements and at other functions that I participated. Although I appreciated the positive sentiments and acknowledgements to this effect, I worked rather diligently to discourage such –my interests in these regards had nothing to do with becoming “the first” at anything. I was simply pursuing my sincere professional interests – pursuant to the reasons as to why I was attracted to the profession. However, I've recently begun to better accept the idea of my being in this position for reasons other than what I've shared in this publication, as my ancillary experiences and interactions with diverse populations strongly suggests to me that many people still require inspiration and encouragement to pursue their dreams and ambitions. Based on my humble beginnings and the blessed ability to reach beyond the limits of my initial circumstances on Chicago's Southside, I believe that each of us as human beings, have an inherent obligation respectively. I am likewise proud that my dedication and commitment to public service has enabled my ability in that regard.