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**BEYOND TRAINING: DEVELOPING AND NURTURING LEADERS FOR THE
PUBLIC SECTOR**

GOVERNMENT OF THE FUTURE: GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

Symposium to be held in Paris, 14-15 September 1999

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**BEYOND TRAINING:
DEVELOPING AND NURTURING LEADERS FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

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Introduction

1. Experience has taught us that vigorous, effective leadership is essential for implementing significant change in any organization. In both the private and public sectors there is widespread recognition that leadership is a key ingredient in the recipe for creating effective, responsive, and value creating organizations. Very expensive executive compensation plans, extensive corporate investments in leadership development programs, and a growing professional literature on leadership development provide ample evidence that the private sector is aware of the importance of leadership. The private sector has also focused on the need for successful organizations to have predictable and reliable supplies of leaders to fuel future growth (see Tichy).

2. The public sector has also developed an awareness of the critical importance of leadership in reshaping government to meet the needs of the 21st century. The challenge facing the public sector is how it can develop and nurture leaders given the unique constraints it faces in managing its human resources. These constraints include tight limits on executive and managerial compensation, civil service hiring and career path structures, and the restrictions political leaders may impose on the career service in selecting and grooming future leadership candidates.

3. Undoubtedly, leadership development should be approached holistically. It should encompass the entire human resources management process – including initial recruitment, compensation, retirement arrangements, formal promotions systems, performance appraisals, and career-long professional education. Arguably, the widening gap between private sector compensation and public sector compensation for senior managers and executives may be the single most important barrier to future recruitment and retention of highly skilled leaders in the public sector. However, the issues of compensation and the future structure of the civil service are far more than can be covered in this short paper. Instead, this paper focuses on practical steps that public sector organizations can take to develop and nurture future leaders from among those already in the civil service. There is ample opportunity for improvement in this area. Such practical actions can help offset some of these disadvantages while political leaders grapple with the larger economic and structural issues in government employment.

What attributes are we seeking in future leaders?

4. Before discussing actions that can be used to develop and nurture future public sector leaders, it would be helpful to identify the attributes future government leaders should possess in order to be successful in the 21st century. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has identified five core qualifications for the Senior Executive Service (SES), the top strata of the federal government career civil service. These core attributes provide a good profile of the public sector leadership attributes needed in the future. They include:

- Leading change;
- Leading people;
- Being results driven;
- Possessing business acumen;
- Building coalitions and communications skills.

5. Today's senior government executives possess a very similar picture of the attributes the future public sector leader will require. The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government recently published the results of a carefully designed survey of the U.S. federal government Senior Executive Service. Respondents were asked to identify the most critical attributes for future career senior executives. The attributes they identified were very similar to those noted above. (See Annex 1 for a discussion of this survey.)

6. Noteworthy is the high importance attached to 'softer' attributes such as flexibility, vision, and customer orientation in contrast to the lower importance attached to 'hard' attributes such as technical expertise or management of information technology. Developing leaders with these attributes will predominantly require 'on the job' development rather than training through classroom or university executive education programs.

Leadership development within the constraints of the current system

7. Given this picture of the leadership attributes needed in the future, what steps can be taken within the constraints of the existing civil service structures to improve the supply of future public sector leaders? The experience of this author and his colleagues suggests six steps that can increase the supply of leaders in public sector organizations:

- 1) Top agency leadership commitment to developing future leaders.
- 2) Building leadership skills through a broad range of assignments.
- 3) Build self-awareness of leadership skills through better feedback and skill building experiences.
- 4) Encourage and monitor the use of 'job enlargement' to develop staff.
- 5) Build on the ethos of public service.
- 6) Regularly conduct 'leadership audits' within the organization.

Top agency leadership commitment to developing future leaders

8. A critical first step for increasing the ability of public sector organizations to develop and nurture more leaders is for top management to recognize that it must devote far more time and attention to leadership development than is now the case. Best practice in the most successful private businesses is for senior executives to develop a significant portion of their time (up to 25 per cent) to developing leaders. Such involvement entails more than participating in training classes. It includes championing rotational assignments, demanding that appraisal systems incorporate techniques like 360 degree feedback, and monitoring the number of younger staff involved in special project task forces and other developmental assignments. Extensive involvement of senior executives can send a powerful signal to the organization

about what qualities are desired in its leaders and the importance of developing those qualities within its staff.

Building leadership skills through a broad range of assignments

9. The leadership attributes needed in the future cannot be learned in a classroom. They must be cultivated through a range of practical experiences gained in the process of solving real problems encountered by real organizations. To this end, leadership development in government service must rely heavily on the conscious cultivation of career mobility for career staff. Such mobility can help individuals broaden their understanding of the mission, processes, issues, and stakeholders of important public sector agencies. Such breadth of experience can help test for and build flexibility and adaptability. It can also give opportunities to understand strategic issues, the range of possible visions that can be effected in public agencies, and the value of building networks and alliances to support change programs.

10. This mobility and broad experience can be promoted with a number of tools already available to senior public sector leaders. By making conscious use of these tools as a mechanism for leadership development, senior executives can take positive steps to improve the supply of leadership within their organization. Examples of these tools include:

- Using lateral transfers, within large departments or between departments, designed to expose individuals to a variety of problems, work settings, and managerial issues throughout their careers.
- Consciously choosing staff to participate on special projects and task forces in order to give them opportunities to ‘stretch’ their skills and capabilities by helping solve real problems facing their organizations.
- Rotating key managerial assignments among ‘up and coming’ managers and executives as a conscious action to broaden their career experience and test their ability to adapt to new circumstances, manage diverse groups of staff, and respond to new customer groups.

11. Organizations such as the various branches of the U.S. military, the Department of State, and various state government departments the author has consulted with since the early 1980’s routinely use such tools. They typically have much larger pools of managers and executives with well developed leadership capabilities than do agencies with more passive approaches to leadership development. They have been able to do so within the confines of a heavily regulated government personnel management system.

Build self-awareness of leadership skills through better feedback and skill building experiences

12. Research by Professor Warner Burke of Columbia University has shown that successful leaders in business tend to be more ‘self-aware’ than their less successful peers. Self-awareness can be cultivated by providing feedback about an individual’s managerial and leadership skills through the performance appraisal process. A very valuable tool in this regard is 360-degree feedback. Such feedback involves structured collection of input from subordinates, peers, and superiors. This range of feedback can help the individual gain a better perspective on their skills in working within and leading teams, the clarity of their communication, and their particular management style. The questions covered in such feedback instruments can be tailored to the leadership competencies and values that each public sector organization requires. Organizations that are truly committed to developing more and better leaders have embraced the

use of 360-degree feedback. Since initially such systems are likely to be perceived as threatening to traditional notions of the relationships between superiors and subordinates, it is essential that the most senior executives in a public agency support such a system and participate in it themselves. (Another benefit of such systems is that they provide hard data on the extent to which an organization and its managers really practice the values and principles espoused in many vision and strategy statements.)

13. Such feedback will highlight areas where developing leaders will need help in mastering a variety of interpersonal skills. Such skills include giving and receiving constructive feedback on performance, conflict resolution, forming and working in teams, and utilizing different management styles to match the needs of different staff. Such skills must be developed through on job experience. However, formal training can be helpful in giving developing leaders the tools and insights they need to develop their capabilities in these areas. Top agency leaders should ensure that these training resources are available to support the development of future leaders.

Encourage and monitor the use of 'job enlargement' to develop staff

14. Regular and effective use of 'job enlargement' by managers and executives is a tool that can be used to enhance leadership development within an organization. Staff members grow when given the need and opportunity to 'stretch' out of their area of current competence. All too often, managers and executives turn to the same group of proven performers to tackle a crisis, staff a task force, or lead an inter-departmental work group. While this might make the executive rest easier, it misses a golden opportunity to test and develop leadership skills in other staff. Public agencies must operate on the twin assumptions that leadership is in short supply within public agencies and that it will be unlikely that leadership skills will be bought on the external labor market. Consequently, every opportunity to provide practical leadership development opportunities to existing staff must be used in order to expand the supply of skilled leaders within public agencies.

15. Our reluctance to provide such 'job enlargement' challenges to younger staff is usually based on concern about whether such staff are capable of meeting the challenge. This reluctance is ironic in light of much experience in the public sector. It is routine for the armed forces of many nations to assign major organizational responsibilities in time of war to men and women in their mid-twenties. Another illustration of calling on younger staff to solve a complex problem under crisis conditions involved the Apollo 13 mission to the moon. In the spring of 1970, the lives of three astronauts on the mission were in jeopardy due to an explosion in their space vehicle while it was over 100,000 miles from earth. The solution to the crisis that brought the three men home safely was developed in a period of 72 hours. The team that solved the many problems involved in the safe return of the astronauts averaged slightly less than 27 years of age.

Build on the ethos of public service

16. High performing career public sector executives (at least in the United States) can usually obtain higher salaries by pursuing private sector employment. By an overwhelming margin, they indicate that the principal reason they chose to join and stay with the public service (despite the lower pay) is the social significance and challenging nature of the work performed by government. Since it is unlikely that the public sector will ever be able to fully compete with the private sector on compensation alone, it is essential that it make full use of its major competitive advantage in this area – the very work it performs. In recruiting, developing, and nurturing future leaders, the public sector should consciously attempt to give promising staff opportunities to test and develop leadership skills by working on the most complex and important public sector problems. At the same time leadership skills are developed and problems solved,

staff commitment to public service will be reinforced, making it less likely that they will be enticed to join the private sector.

Regularly conduct 'leadership audits' within the organization

17. If leadership development is to be a priority of top management, then it is necessary to monitor performance and make adjustments in response to such information. A simple set of performance measures in this area would include:

- Monitoring the number and location of staff currently on rotational or other developmental assignments.
- Requiring all senior executives and managers to develop succession plans naming individuals who could assume their post should they retire or move to another post. (While civil service systems may prevent formal designation of successors through this process, the act of developing such succession plans forces discussions about specific individuals and the overall state of leadership development in an organization.)
- Reviewing the aggregate results of 360-degree feedback surveys to identify the specific leadership competencies that are lacking within the organization. This information can be used in career counseling, training, and assignment decisions to help build the missing competencies.
- Monitor the amount of time top agency leaders devote to developing future leaders and their impact in terms of assisting a variety of younger staff gain exposure to 'job enlargement' opportunities.

Conclusion

18. Many observers have written about the likely shape of organizations in the future and how they will be 'flatter' or less layered than is now the norm. (See Kotter or Barzelay for examples) This 'de-layering' of public sector organizations will create the need for more leadership skills (flexibility, business acumen, customer focus, etc.) throughout the organization. The rapid advance of the Internet and electronic commerce will only accelerate this trend as they break down the barriers to information flow between and within government agencies. Consequently, leadership development will have to become a priority of public sector senior executives. It can no longer be an optional activity of top executives.

19. The very de-layering of government that makes leadership development a pressing need also creates a great opportunity for developing new leaders at all levels within career government service. Whole new approaches need to be developed for managing core business processes, interacting with customers and other stakeholders, and demonstrating how government functions create value for the public. In all of these challenges we find great opportunities for current government staff to develop and exercise the very leadership skills the future requires. Senior political leaders and senior career executives should seize these opportunities and make their organizations use them to increase the breadth and depth of leadership skills in the public sector.

ANNEX 1
RESULTS OF THE 1999 GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP SURVEY

In late 1998, the PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government commissioned a survey of a random sample of members of the U.S. Senior Executive Service (SES). The study was published in June 1999. The survey focused on the attributes needed for future federal government leaders, the obstacles to recruiting and retaining staff with these attributes, and solutions to ensure successful leadership in future years. The critical leadership attributes and the percentage of the sample rating them as 'highly important' were:

Leadership Attributes	Per cent Rating Attribute as Highly Important (a score of 9 or 10 on a 10 point scale)
1. Adaptability and flexibility	72%
2. Accountability	69%
3. Vision and strategic thinking	64%
4. Customer orientation	58%
5. Commitment to public service	55%
6. Management of financial resources	44%
7. Ability to establish alliances/networks	41%
8. Value placed on cultural diversity	39%
9. Management of information technology	37%
10. Technical expertise	23%

N = 347 respondents surveyed between November 1998 and January 1999

A complete copy of the research study can be obtained from:

PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government
1616 North Fort Myer Drive,
Arlington, VA 22209-3195.
Telephone 01-703-741-1733.
Internet address: mark.abramson@us.pwcglobal.com

Additional Reading

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