

The Gift of Public Service

The roll call vote to fire you has the same cadence as ten thousand other votes you've sat through; Alderman Smith ... Alderman Jones, and so on down the dais. They could be voting on a zoning variance. They could be voting on a permit for a local charity to hold a fund raiser in the town square. But they are voting to fire you.

Moments of clarity are rare, I surmise, because there is only so much clarity a person can take at any one time. The reflexive, detached cadence of the vote has a calming effect, much like the last stages of drowning. The vote gets tallied, and I've lived to be immersed in the cleansing waters of local government another day. Hold onto a branch, retreat to shore or jump back in the current?

That decision was made years ago. An unashamed urbanist from conception, with a debt to society that allowed some headway against a tide of challenges in my youth, the city management profession came to me as a blessing. Setting the record for tenure as a mid career manager (six years, no kidding) in Davenport, I was already nearing the bonus round at the time. The vote to fire me came from nowhere, and everywhere. It wasn't on the agenda. But it was clearly on the minds of some I work for. It still lingers on my mind, reminding me each day is a gift, not to be squandered.

City Managers need just three things; brains, heart and backbone. Well, that and a great staff, supportive Council, understanding family and no small amount of luck. But, getting back to the three things, the operating theory of local government management I've been able to cobble together is it requires an adaptive balance of how, why and what. Brains, heart and backbone.

Why you are in the profession – your heart – can't be taught. You can be reconnected to it, you can try to manufacture a reason for it, but if you don't have an unshakable and authentic passion for this profession, my modest suggestion is to not waste your time, or anyone else's, tiptoeing through a life of public service. If you have lost the passion, either find it again, or move along so someone in the next generation can exceed the expectations of the citizens we serve.

How you do what you do – your brains – can be taught. Indeed, the vast majority of our academic preparation and professional development is dedicated to the breadth and depth of technical matters. Law, planning, finance, engineering, human resources, public engagement; knowledge all available for the asking. Parks, police, fire, housing, transit; technical skills easily amassed by cracking open a book, learning from others or the ever popular trial and error. Even management, that catch-all conundrum, can be taught and learned,

at least at a perfunctory level. A bit of why mixed with a never ending buffet of how could get you all the way to a comfortable pension. But what would be the point?

What you do matters most. The what – your backbone – is the difference maker. Why is a given, and how certainly matters. Efficiently, yes. Effectively, yes. Charitably, hopefully. Ethically, absolutely. Yet, given the choices we all have before us, every day we are on the public payroll, the what of our career matters most. It is the very essence of the operational art of leadership. In a profession with roots in technical proficiency, the what of our career still gets comparatively short shrift in academic preparation and ongoing professional development. What change are you able to effect? What change are you obligated to effect? What will you do with the great gift of public service? Allow me a few observations to start a conversation.

First, there are no leaders. The leader is a myth. Like many myths, it comforts us and shields us from responsibility. The presumption that an individual with mythic properties will appear to make all that is wrong, right again, is doubly damaging. It empowers charlatans and, by extension, strips from others responsibility and potential within their grasp, but beyond their comprehension. The notion of the leader is alluring, as most successful traps are. The opposite of a trap is freedom, and a

particularly liberating understanding is that, while there are no leaders, there are leadership behaviors.

The behaviors can be taught, and presumably learned. They can be tested in a progression of small, medium and large moments so one might be ready to trot them out when needed. The behaviors are codified. Do it right, or don't do it at all, says dad, three thousand, six hundred and twenty four times so far. Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind...gets you through scouts. A coach's advice to "shake it off". A teacher's mentorship. The ICMA code of ethics. Bookstore shelves fairly bursting with pleasantly packaged management fads. Pick your tribe, pick your mantra. Themes of responsibility, personal industry, integrity and generalized reciprocity will prevail. "And justice for all..." will end the pledge starting the meeting with the vote to fire you.

Rare as the behaviors are, should you exhibit them with any regularity, others will tend to confuse you with someone approximating a leader, and bestow upon you the honors and privileges according to the designation. Generally, this means more thorny problems headed in your direction and, in our line of work, becoming acquainted with termination proceedings. Along with such tribulations comes a small benefit in keeping with the profession's sustainable legacy ideal; you might pass on some potentially worthwhile advice.

Mine will be brief.

Leadership is not the exercise of authority. Authority is a resource. Use it sparingly yourself, and multiply its impact by loaning it out to others. Leadership is confused with, but is not charisma. Charisma is, at best, a tool. Sometimes you have it, sometimes you don't. Don't count on it, and remember, anchors are tools too. *Leadership is not having the right answers.* Leadership is asking questions and being genuinely interested in the answers of others, particularly those that strike you as peculiar. If you are providing more answers than asking questions, beware. Leadership is not being fearless. Fail at the minor stuff all you like but, if you are doing something important, you should be quite afraid of failure. Leadership is not making people happy. Leadership is shouldering responsibility.

Leadership is bringing a new and generally unwelcome reality to an individual, group or community, and helping it or them successfully rise above it. Adaptation to unwelcome realities and rising above unpleasant challenges is rarely a simple, happy activity achieved through charismatic authority, irrespective of the prevailing mythology of airport bookstore choices.

In the end, no matter the sincerity of your “why” or the deftness with which you wield the collection of the “how” in your toolbox, the “what” of leadership will define your career and impact the

communities you serve long after your departure. The principle of stewardship as leadership legacy is not a concept the city management profession invented. What will you do with the gift of public service? The Athenian Oath provides a timeless guide:

We will never bring disgrace on this our City by an act of dishonesty or cowardice. We will fight for the ideals and sacred things of the City both alone and with many. We will revere and obey the City's laws, and will do our best to incite a like reverence and respect in those above us who are prone to annul them or set them at naught. We will strive increasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty. Thus in all these ways we will transmit this City, not only not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

As the roll call vote is called out, or as the last candle is blown out on the retirement party cake, I wish you the peace of clarity that you gave it your all.

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