

Reflections on Public Service

By **Karen Suzuki-Okabe**

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It is such an honor for me to receive this award. What is particularly meaningful to me is that this award is named after Dale Wright, who has a special place in my heart. Dale was the director of what was then the Institute of Public Management. He was one of my professors, and he gave me the opportunity to teach human resources in the MPA program.

My experiences at BYU were wonderful, and I was treated with kindness. I was initially apprehensive that I would have some difficulties as a non-LDS student, but my fears were without foundation. I enjoyed not only an outstanding academic experience but developed lifelong friendships as well.

I started working for the State of Utah in September 1974 and worked in the State EEO Office with Jack Quintana. I worked in the departments of administrative services, human resource management, and commerce until I was appointed the state's HR director.

My first appointed position was with Governor Scott M. Matheson, a Democrat. I was fired by Republican Lt. Governor Val Oveson, when Republican Governor Norman Bangerter was elected. I was then appointed by Mayor Palmer DePaulis, a Democrat, and fired by Democrat DeeDee Coridini when she was elected, and then hired by Republican Governor Mike Leavitt. Fired by a female Democrat and hired by a Republican governor. Who knew?

For those of you who may not know me, I am a Democrat. I guess I like being in the minority. First I was a non-Mormon at a Mormon university and later a Democrat in a Republican administration.

It may be helpful to understand what a democrat is. If you ask Frank Laden, he describes it in this way, "I am not a member of any organized party. I am a Democrat."

It may be important to differentiate between a Republican and a Democrat. Let me share with you a brief definition by example:

A Republican will throw a drowning person 100 yards off shore a 50-yard rope, believing that the 50 yard swim will be good for his or her character.

A Democrat, on the other hand, will throw a drowning person a 100-yard rope, but then leave to do another good deed.

I have had a career in public service for more than thirty years, mostly in Utah. I have had a wonderful time in the public service and would encourage both young and old to consider either employment or volunteering in this sector.

Since retiring, I have volunteered as a pro bono mediator for the Labor and Anti-Discrimination Division. As a mediator, I try to resolve employment discrimination charges through mediation. I am a proponent of this form of conflict resolution. In April 2003, I received my conflict resolution certificate from the University of Utah, and I'm a member of the Utah Council for Conflict Resolution.

Governor Leavitt initially appointed four women to his Cabinet: Dianne Neilsen, Connie White, Raylene Ireland, and me. He knew I was a Democrat and appointed me anyway. I knew I had been nominated by others, but dismissed them quickly because I was positive that a Republican would never hire a Democrat for a cabinet-level position. I was wrong.

Part of my job was to work with the legislature. I have tremendous respect for the legislative staff. It was interesting to find that legislative staff faced the same frustrations with the legislators that

we on the executive branch experienced. It was evident that some legislators did not trust their own staff.

In the final analysis, all members—elected, appointed, career service, and interest groups—have a vested interest in improving public service. We all have different views on the priorities, methodology, and tactics and therein lies the challenge. When these parties move beyond their partisan agendas and move toward collaboration effective government really begins. Unfortunately, in recent times, the more powerful “fringe” minority has conducted itself more as a bully than a consensus builder. I watched this power in action, dealing with gun control, redistricting, hate crimes, etc.

When the budget crunch hit about four years ago, I observed an interesting phenomenon. The first year, many elected officials were apologetic about the necessity to reject any consideration of a salary increase for state employees. But by the second and third years, sentiments expressed were different and characterized by comments like, “They are lucky to have a job in these hard economic times.” Those comments were interpreted to mean that employees were not valued and appreciated. Many felt legislators and administrators were taking the term “public servant” too literally. I remember many cabinet meetings where department heads were concerned about their agency’s morale and unsuccessfully tried to make a case for salary increases.

Interestingly, elected officials in local government continued to grant salary increases to their employees. The difference is that local government views employees as their employees, providing services to their constituents, and their employees cast ballots in their elections.

State employees are more removed from the legislature. Representatives from rural Utah are voting on salaries for employees they do not know. In many rural towns, the best paying jobs are state jobs, and are salaries they compete against. State employees’ salaries are on average higher than local government.

In general, state employees have more specialized skills. This is due to the fact that the state provides more extensive and specialized services. Local government is principally public works and public safety. The need for environmental scientists, chemists, physicians, social workers, etc. are generally not needed on local level; many services are provided by the state. Needless to say, that the disparity of salaries from state to local government is not unique to Utah, but holds true nationally as well.

The need for government services is increasing while the money to pay for government is decreasing. Doing more for less is less slogan and more reality. Pay increases of 1 percent to base salaries for a three-year period do not even come close to the inflation increase over the same time period. How can we begin to address the challenges that face government today?

Let me offer three suggestions of things we can do to improve government:

Better Management

I have observed many outstanding managers in state government who could motivate, encourage, mentor, and distinguish and address job performance levels. They advocate for their employees and provide honest and objective feedback on job performance. The problem is that little is done to either recognize or encourage good management. You are an ineffective manager when you see your employees do a mediocre job and award the same pay increases. Over time, this can take the wind out of your leadership sail. If an organization can establish a culture where good management matters, training/educational opportunities are offered and good management practices are publicized and promoted, management could improve in government. Programs like the MPA program help provide the information and instruction for such improvements to occur.

This is not about money. This is about investing in people you entrust to lead employees. The majority of all adult learning occurs in the workplace. Targeted management instruction will be beneficial in improving the quality of work life.

Re-evaluate the Sacred Cows

Things are very slow to change in government. Many programs are institutional sacred cows, and to offer new approaches is often met with resistance, if you're lucky, or out-right hostility if you're not. One of those sacred cows is retirement.

During one of the last sessions I attended with the State Budget Office, I met with members of the Utah Retirement Board, which included the Public Employees Health Program (PEHP). We were discussing the economic picture for salaries and benefits for state employees and projections for the future.

Both retirement and PEHP were projecting increases. Both were requesting appropriation and possible increased participation by employees to have a greater share of out-of-pocket expense. The picture was grim.

A colleague turned to me and asked about the future of pension programs. I had just returned from a benefits conference and heard from leading benefits consultants that more companies were moving from traditional pension programs to 401K options. Further, they state that for recruitment purposes of top executives, pension programs are no longer a component of their compensation package.

I'm not suggesting that the state eliminate its retirement program. What I am suggesting is that we look at other options. Retirement programs were created in an era long since passed. In today's environment, they are expensive to maintain. Why not look at options that will reflect today's needs. What I am suggesting is that there be options rather than one size fits all. Generation X will not be interested in waiting thirty years for their reward, so why not provide a different option than the one their parents had?

Mediation as a Method of Conflict Resolution

I have become a recent convert to the power of mediation as a viable method of conflict resolution. I was asked to speak at Utah State's Partner's Program this spring on the subject of mediation in the workplace. The idea of working toward an agreement constructed by the parties involved in the conflict, establishing common ground, and focusing on win/win outcomes are worth exploring.

Bureaucracy is marked by redundant procedures. The appeal process often feels never-ending. I terminated an employee and thirteen years later, I am still not sure if another lawsuit will emerge. I have been upheld in every lawsuit this employee has initiated, but I don't feel like a winner. We provide administrative reviews/hearings on our own cases, promising an objective review. But to the public, it looks like a stacked deck no matter how fairly the review is conducted.

Mediation is not advisable in all cases, but ask yourself the question: Is it more important to be right or is it more important to end the dispute? If you decide it is more important to end the dispute, mediation is a vehicle to help you get there. This is particularly true when relationships are at issue such as a dispute with a co-worker, supervisor/employee, stakeholder, client, etc.

Why not look at mediation as a way to address disputes? Mediation:

1. Is voluntary. Any party can walk away from the mediation without explanation. What keeps you at the table is the desire parties have to end the conflict.

2. Is confidential. A mediator cannot ever discuss the mediation. All notes are destroyed, and a mediator will move to quash any subpoena.
3. Relies on the premise of collective good will of the parties.
4. Is timely and inexpensive.
5. Uses a neutral third party, who is a process and communication expert.

I was asked to review a policies and procedures manual for an organization. It stated that any grievance could be appealed to the executive director for a final decision. I suggested that we change the procedure to eliminate the executive director (who probably would not be seen as neutral) and replaced him or her with a mediator. This administrator agreed.

As I reflect on my time in public service, I realize I have had the rare opportunity to work at a job I love. I find myself here as the recipient of this award and know how blessed and grateful I am for the opportunities and relationships I have had.

The role partisan politics play is less significant than the role competency and commitment play to public service. In the final analysis, good public policy is important, not which party wins.

I would like to leave you with a quote that is a favorite of mine and is taken from The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran:

Work is love made visible.

And if you cannot work with love ... It is better that you should leave your work...

For if you back bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half one's hunger.

I would like to thank BYU and the faculty of the Romney Institute of Public Management, and special thanks to Dale Wright, Bob Parsons, Gary Cornia, and Tanya Harmon. Thanks also to my friends who have come to be here tonight, and with special love to my family: Rick, Brooke, Todd, and my mother.