

Romney Institute – Alumnus of Year Speech

Thank you, Director Thompson and the Romney Institute for this recognition. My speaking assignment today is to share my vision for successful public service and how you can make an impact in improving the governance of the organizations you work for and with. Unfortunately, anything I say today will be anti-climactic in comparison to the stunning, historic drama of last week. However, those events do provide a relevant backdrop for my remarks.

Winston Churchill quoted an unknown predecessor when he said: “. . . democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time . . .” You have also likely heard this oft-quoted statement: “Democracy is messy”, which is attributed to several individuals, including former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld when the U.S. was first trying to put Iraq back together again, but it applies to democracy in general. We have certainly witnessed that at the national level this year. But democracy is also often “messy” at the other levels of government. One of the key reasons it survives, however, is because of the role of professional, public administrators like many of you in this room. During times of political transition and chaos, whether at the national or local level, public administrators stabilize the “ship of state” by seeing that the rule of law is honored, essential public services continue to be provided in a fair and equitable manner, and that critical infrastructure is maintained. Many of these public administrators—at all levels of government—also serve as key advisors trying in good faith to help newly elected officials govern ethically and effectively.

For those of us who serve as chief administrative officers and report to city councils or governing boards, we know they will be most effective if they learn and perform their proper role—defining community or organizational values and setting priorities—and let us perform our role of managing the operations. We have a duty to help them understand, embrace and stay focused on their proper role. If there is a foundation of trust, they will have confidence that we can take care of operations and that our knowledge and experience can help them be effective in their role. Without that trust in us, they will spend more time meddling “in the weeds”. A solid foundation of trust is built upon a number of factors, including

- ethical behavior
- demonstrating respect in all communications
- doing good staff work based on good analysis
- delivering results
- admitting our mistakes

But for me I have found that it all begins by accepting—in good faith—the outcome of the democratic process—as messy as it may be—putting aside bad feelings and perceptions and giving a real chance for a relationship of trust.

Yes, democracy at the local level is often messy. Let me take you back in time 33 years ago. I was working in my first city management job as the first town manager in a small, rural community in Arizona. My first year was focused on improving the internal administration of small town government,

and there was plenty of easy picking to demonstrate the value of a professional manager, so I would characterize my first year as very successful and I enjoyed the confidence and support of the Town Council. Then I embarked on the greatest learning experience of my professional career. I proposed that this small community would benefit from adopting land use regulations—or zoning—that would promote more orderly and compatible growth. The town council was supportive. Unfortunately, though, my timing was very bad, because this became the central issue of the next election which was literally just a few months away—my first municipal election after becoming the town manager. Many residents characterized zoning as an evil practice that would infringe on sacred property rights. A cartoon circulated in the town depicted me at my desk in the town council chambers, advising the town council while holding the Communist Manifesto. Although the election ballot was already set with candidates who were mostly in favor of zoning, the opposition rallied the community and promoted a couple of right-in candidates. A majority of the voters voted for pro-zoning candidates, but due to the dilution of the votes among a greater number of pro-zoning candidates, all four seats up for election were won by anti-zoning candidates. In other words, the new majority on the 7-member town council was opposed to the zoning initiative I had promoted.

I will never forget how I felt on election night. No sleep, wondering if mine would be a very short city management career—either by my choice or by the new town council's choice. This is when I made one of the most important decisions of my career. I decided to accept the outcome of the democratic process—as crazy as it was—and pledge my best professional effort to help the new council succeed with their vision and priorities, whatever those might be. Fortunately they gave me the opportunity to do so. My employment was not terminated. And thus I embarked on the mission of building a foundation of trust with these newly-elected officials. Unfortunately the first year of the new town council was a raucous period during which one of the new council members survived a recall election promoted by several other council members, one of whom resigned after the recall effort failed. After that first year things settled down, and I was able to work with the Council in creating a vision they could all support—a major plan to upgrade the streets, drainage and water system infrastructure. This required a significant bond issue and new tax that the voters approved with 80% in favor—a satisfying turnaround from the prior election.

Now I would like to fast forward about 30 years to my most recent municipal election. As I just mentioned, the central issue of my first municipal election was opposition to the idea of imposing any form of zoning on the community. Ironically, the central issue of my most recent municipal election was on the other end of the land use regulation spectrum—whether Centerville should use the zoning tool to prevent any more high-density housing in the community. The incumbents—who were perceived as being responsible for some of the high-density housing in the city—lost, and all three seats were filled by candidates who ran against the idea of any more high-density housing and with the intent of reversing some of the decisions of prior councils. This gives you a sense of the challenge I had again to build a foundation of trust with a new city council.

During my 33 years as a city manager, with elections every two years, I have witnessed the swearing in of a number of new council members who were unfair to me during the campaign or whom I perceived

as not well suited for elected office. So what have I learned about building a foundation of trust in those circumstances? It requires first a charitable heart and mindset. It is the age-old problem of human nature—we have a hard time putting aside perceptions and biases based on limited prior experience with an individual—or we have trouble forgiving someone for their unkindness or unfairness towards us. In other words, we have to adjust our hearts and minds to allow a fresh start without keeping score of the past. If this sounds like I am referring to the quality referred to in the scriptures as “charity” or the “pure love of Christ”—that is my intent.

Recently I read the book “Leadership and Self-Deception”. It gives excellent advice about human relations. But to me the advice sounded a lot like the characteristics of charity in non-religious terms. The Romney Institute has been working on a “good governance model” that includes charity—or love for others as defined by the scriptural meaning of charity—as one of the core principles for good governance from a Latter-Day Saint perspective. Now I am not suggesting we overlook the unethical or illegal behavior of our governing board members; accountability is also one of the core principles of the good governance model. But a charitable heart will serve us well in most of our dealings with others. So my advice to you today is simply this: **to pray for and nurture a charitable heart**—slow to judge, quick to forgive, exercising patience when provoked, not easily offended, avoiding arrogance, and seeking to truly understand another’s point of view.

It was a gratifying moment recently when one of my new council members volunteered that he had turned completely around in his view of me—from being very suspicious during the campaign season to a solid supporter, even to the point that I now had, as he expressed it-- “credit in the cupboard”. It was further gratifying to witness his courage to speak out publicly in my defense. Now here is the admission I made to him—that I had also been guilty of misjudging him based on what I saw and heard during the election campaign, and so I was glad we gave each other the chance to show who we really are. Nurturing a charitable heart is a life-long process, and I still have a ways to go.

Before I close, I would like to recognize the many professionals in this room engaged in public or non-profit service. The Romney Institute’s good governance model states that the objective of government should be to promote “human flourishing”. Your work and the decisions of your governing boards promote conditions for human flourishing—whether your work is national defense or public safety, promoting healthy living, providing public transportation, serving the underprivileged or many other avenues of public service. Please forgive me if I take a minute to express how gratifying my career in local government has been for me personally. As a city manager my mission has been to provide the physical environment and public services that enable children and adults to exercise their agency to achieve their highest ambitions in life. That physical environment and those public services enable

- Schools to exist so our youth can be educated
- Churches to be built where religious freedom can be exercised
- Active living opportunities for better health and longer life
- Safe homes and neighborhoods where character building occurs and values are taught
- Commerce to thrive and generate economic prosperity

After the monetary paychecks end for my contributions to human flourishing, I will continue to be “paid” by the lasting satisfaction I feel from projects like the following:

- Transforming an ugly, abandoned gravel pit into a beautiful park
- Building a debris dam that protects 200 homes from the threat of flooding or landslide
- Partnering with the County to master plan and build a joint park and library
- Constructing a performing arts center for community theater to uplift and inspire us

Part of that continuing paycheck is also knowing of the success of those I mentored as employees—current city managers and others working as local government professionals. I am also grateful that for the past 13 years—while on the Romney Institute Advisory Board—I could rub shoulders with outstanding young men and women of faith and character preparing to make a real difference in the world. Thank you again for this honor today.