

N. Dale Wright Distinguished Alumnus Speech

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The People Who Serve

Thank you very much for this wonderful, unexpected honor. When Vicki called me about it, I was literally speechless. All the alumni here today could stand here just as well. Thank you for your example.

I thank my family, dear friends, and colleagues who are here. They have been an inspiration to me and their support over the years has been the major reason for any success I may have had. I owe a lot to my 92 year old father who flew up from Southern California to be here. He taught my brothers and me how to work. He got up to go to work every day so I grew up figuring that's what I was supposed to do. He had us paint the whole outside of the house every year whether it needed it or not. I remember one summer standing on top of a 20 foot ladder hanging on the eaves with one hand and painting with the other.

I thank my beautiful wife Kerry. For these 39 plus years of my career, she's cheered me on and picked me up when I was down. She's washed my shirts and made sure I wore a tie that matched. She's also given good counsel on perplexing work problems. It's good to come home every evening to a kiss.

I'm grateful to my children who also have learned how to work hard and put up with me when I came home from work still thinking about work. We're supposed to leave it at the office but it's hard to do isn't it. I take joy in their accomplishments.

I'm thankful to my employer, the State of Utah and specifically the State Tax Commission. I went to work for the Commission 32-1/2 years ago largely because I felt good about the people I had met. I feel even better about them today. It is a superb organization led by great managers. Thank you Commissioner Valentine, Commissioner Walters, and Deputy Executive Director Deanna Herring.

I owe a great deal to the Romney Institute. I enjoyed my time here. I had great professors. Lennis Knighton, Doyle Buckwalter, Gloria Wheeler, Kent Colton, Bill Timmins, Dale Wright and others. Dr. Wright, this award means even more because it has your name on it. You were already a legend when I started in the program back in 1978. Dr. Wadsworth and her colleagues and staff are furthering the excellent reputation and work of the Romney Institute.

I remember my MPA orientation meeting in the Jesse Knight Building. Lennis Knighton was the Director. He said if you're looking to get rich, go down the hall to the MBA program. But if you're looking to have a rewarding career of public service that will provide decently for your family, you're in the right place. He was right on both counts. I didn't get rich. But I have had a very fulfilling career and our family had the things we needed.

The name Romney Institute of Public Service and Ethics is a very fitting name because it is all about public service. The emphasis on ethics is spot on. Never have ethical public servants been so needed.

I had a distant relative who used to tease me about working in government. He would say, "Doral, how is it feeding at the public trough?" I believe it was said in good fun but I admit it bothered me a little. As I've thought about it, I've not been feeding at the public trough. I was providing the trough and filling it so that the public could feed from it. In other words so that they could receive services for which they paid in an effective and efficient manner.

In the early years of my career with the Legislative Auditor General's Office, I tried to ensure that state agencies and political subdivisions provided effective and efficient services-everything from well-planned state computer systems to the availability of low and moderate income housing loans, apprenticeship training, tested cattle and animal feed, fair and accurate centrally assessed property valuation methods, efficiently run school districts and yes, even provision of alcoholic beverages from the State Liquor Control Commission.

Then as the Tax Commission's Internal Audit Director, I tried to make sure tax returns and payments were processed and banked timely, that our Motor Vehicle Division branches properly accounted for revenue, our purchasing of technology was done according to state policy, that our tax audits were targeting the right taxpayers, that the rare occasions of misappropriation were discovered and the perpetrator held accountable and dozens of other projects. Aman Kudiya and I worked in Internal Audit for 21 years. Thanks for being here Aman.

Today my team and I in the Criminal Investigation Unit try to ensure that the citizens of Utah know that those who intentionally violate the tax laws are brought to justice. I have one of our great investigators here today, Adam Timmins, who has done many of our successful cases.

The State of Utah is consistently ranked at the top in the nation for administration of State government and fiscal stability. This is due in large part to dedicated and talented state employees. I will match the Tax Commission employees with any organization, public or private for their skill and dedication to mission. I'm sure you can say the same about the organizations you work for.

Much of the credit, deservedly so, is paid to those who lead departments, cities, and organizations. The buck stops at their desk. They are sometimes called the movers and shakers, and they are.

But I would like to pay tribute to the ones who maybe really make things move and shake, the men and women below the top who day in and day out make our departments, communities, and organizations run.

I'm thinking of Ellen, Lynda, and Mark in our Processing Division to name just a few. Ellen is basically in charge of getting tax returns processed and your money in the bank and your refunds to you quickly. She has developed a well-oiled, award-winning, team-based approach. Lynda is in charge of the mail room, specifically opening the envelopes the returns come in. Don't bank on a lot of float time. Lynda and her group open 200,000 pieces of mail and get checks in the bank in three days. And they do it with fewer staff than a few years ago. Mark delivers our internal mail throughout the building. He does so dragging an oxygen tank along with the mail cart. He does so always with a smile.

I'm thinking of our Division of Motor Vehicles workers, commonly referred to as the OMV. The OMV is the butt of most all jokes about government workers, but not in the State of Utah. If you go to the OMV during your lunch hour, you'll have time to take care of your business and still get lunch.

I could go on. You know the people I'm talking about. They are in every organization. They come to work every day. They are enthused about what they do. They get the job done. They don't get a lot of fanfare. They don't make a lot of money. But we are sure glad they are there.

May I share a few lessons I've learned and am still learning about being a good public servant and manager. I've had great managers who have taught me these principles. I've still got a ways to go so I can't retire yet.

1. Take care of your people first. Go to bat for them. Get the resources they need. Make sure we let them know we appreciate them. Monetary rewards are few and far between in public service, but should not be forgotten as tools in the tool box. In addition, creative thankyou's go a long way to increase loyalty and morale among our people. John, Larry and Deanna, you don't know how valuable that fall breakfast and summer recognition party is to employees. Managers must also be good at just saying thank you. And mine do.
2. Surround yourself with people smarter than you. As managers, sometimes we feel we have to have all the skills that we manage. If we try to do that, we won't have any time to manage. I have no problem in going to Adam or Greg and asking, "How do I do this? Or, how do you think we ought to approach this. If I didn't do that, I'd be cheating the public. I wouldn't be providing them with the best skills to tackle the problem.
3. Closely related to number 2 is gathering the best resources for a particular project. Be a facilitator to bring in the right people. Know who to go to. In government organizations we might be better positioned to do that than some in the private sector. It might be hard to pull human resources from competing profit centers. Whereas in government departments, you may be able to pick a good team from different divisions. At the Tax Commission we did that in our project to replace our legacy tax accounting system. Management assembled bright people from various divisions and called them business specialists. They and selection of a good contractor with a good product were key reasons we implemented on time and on budget.
4. Don't be afraid to fail. One of our previous commissioners Val Oveson said we can celebrate failure. His meaning was that if you never fail, you've never tried anything. Michael Jordan, the greatest basketball player ever said, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." We had at the Tax Commission, a failure with a previous tax accounting system project. We were a couple of years into the project, but the software was not as developed as we had thought when we signed the contract. After spending millions of dollars, we cancelled the project. We were criticized, and perhaps justly so given the expenditure of tax dollars without result. But you accountants know the principle of sunk cost. Yes, you've spent the money, but don't continue to pour good money after bad.

Time is short, so just some brief observations.

- Eat lunch with the people. Don't just sit at your desk. If you want to find out what's really going on, go to the lunch room.
- Never lose that innocent enthusiasm of a new employee. I still enjoy getting up and coming to work each day, well, most days.
- Do what you don't want to do and do it now.
- If you have a tough phone call to make, make it now.
- A cubicle is much better than an office. You're in the middle of what's going on. You can always find a supply room to hold meetings in.
- And for those of you just starting out in your careers or who are still in the program, don't be shy. You find that you're as good as the next person and in most cases better.

Again, thank you! I will always be proud to be an alumnus of this outstanding Romney Institute of Public Service and Ethics and I'm proud to be a fellow public servant.