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PRIDE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

by Lester Edelman

Rather than offer a new approach to management or a commentary on current or historic events shaping federal service, I want to share some feelings about federal public service. We spend a great amount of time examining leadership styles, management initiatives, partnerships, environmental ethics, values and visions. These are all extremely important in the continued vitality of our government. Essential to the success of each of these efforts is an attitude, or mind set, that every public servant must possess -- Pride in Public Service.

We all begin our careers as accountants, engineers, librarians, lawyers, secretaries, scientists or members of one of the endless list of specialties necessary to support federal programs. We become public servants when we *choose* to direct our skills and talents toward serving our country. At that moment, our professions change! We are no longer defined by our technical skills, but rather, by a collective professional commitment to our nation, *public service*. It is critical that as public servants we remain proud of who we are and what we do.

Our pride in ourselves, our profession and our nation make our system of government successful. Without pride in public service, jealousies develop, protection of perceived power is facilitated, turf fights ensue, a sense of insecurity and a lack of vision follow. Leadership, flexibility and innovation are lost. Most importantly, miscommunication and failure results.

A miracle happens when we take Pride in our work: Our self-respect surges. Partnerships develop as we share our contributions and accomplishments. We form a better understanding of others' interests, and of the organization's vision and relevancy to our nation. Pride in public service permits a demonstration of key values - integrity, professionalism, quality, and caring. It enhances an understanding of the environmental ethic, and the ability to take actions consistent

with that ethic.

I am proud to be in Public Service. When I arrived in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District, in 1958, after practicing law in the private sector, I knew I wanted a career in public service. As the son of immigrants, my decision to enter public service was a matter of great family pride. My parents believed that public service was a way to repay a debt to our country. Pride came easily to those of us beginning our public service during the camelot years of the Kennedy administration, when service to the country was the rallying call of the President in his famous inaugural charge: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." These factors made it an easy decision to enter public service. But it is the work and its rewards that keep me in public service.

Like many of my colleagues, I was first and forever captured by the significance of the work I was *allowed* to perform. In 38 years of public service I was never told that I could *not* do something that I was interested in doing. Even as a new lawyer to federal service I was *allowed* to work on issues vital to war and peace in our nation.

For example, early in my career I served as an attorney in the massive missile systems program which was designed to overcome what has been described as the "Kennedy missile gap". Along with the rest of the country, those of us working in that program felt our work was critical to maintaining peace. We were the good guys in white hats. None of the people, for whom tragedy was averted by the existence of those missiles, know who I am; and that is not important. It does not diminish, all these years later, my feeling of contribution. The opportunity to contribute to a nationally significant program was and continues to be truly awesome. ***That's why I'm proud to be a public servant!***

Today, people in the nuclear missiles systems business might not be perceived to be the good guys. Time passes, politics change and programs, once widely endorsed, at a different time may be highly criticized. A shift in public opinion can sometimes occur faster than the government can react to it. As a result, public servants are often criticized for carrying out the policies and laws established under a previously embraced public sentiment. Today's white hat is tomorrow's black hat.

This partially explains why public servants are often faced with public

disdain for our profession. What most people forget, is that the purpose of government is to do what cannot be done by others. The government provides those services that are hard to do and easy to criticize. Oddly, many of those most critical of the government are beneficiaries of federal programs, but malign the federal employees who make those very programs function. Most often their complaints are broad generalizations about over staffing and inefficiencies based on lack of information or misinformation. This barrage of criticism has been so relentless and far reaching, that it has been a major push behind the downsizing of the federal government in the last decade. More importantly for those of us that remain, I fear it has undermined the pride public servants rightly take in their labors. It is important to our nation that we weather this storm. We must retain our sense of value and sense of pride. We must continue to make our contributions and celebrate them. We have to stand up in the face of adversity and say, "***We are proud to be public servants!***"

I recognize pride is sometimes characterized as arrogance or conceit. Certainly we've all been told that humility is an honorable characteristic, but I am not suggesting that we glorify the individuals. I want you to glorify your work and your contributions. Certainly individual glory often results, but there is no arrogance in celebrating accomplishments. Our partners in the private sector have pride in their organizations, and it is reflected in the enthusiasm they bring to their work. We need to have an equal sense of pride and enthusiasm for the important work that we do. There is no greater service than service to the public. Certainly, many of our counterparts in the private sector provide services to the public. The difference between their contribution and that of a federal public servant, is that the public benefit is a by-product of their quest for profit. The public service is the public servants only purpose.

We need to instill a sense of pride in public service to our colleagues who did not start in government during the days when our hats were still white. These colleagues need to be mentored. We must help them understand the role of their contributions in the health of our nation. We must help them nurture their pride.

First, proclaim your pride in public service. Take every opportunity to declare how proud you are to be doing what you do. Be pro-active. Leaders in government are frequently required to make presentations at conferences, meetings, and special events. Use these opportunities to assert your pride. Even routine business exchanges and weekly staff meetings can be appropriate forums to

comment on a special contribution of a group or an individual. **I am proud to be a public servant. Say it everyday!**

Share the heritage of your organizations. As families pass their history from one generation to the next, we must insure that everyone in the organization, is aware of, at least, our proudest accomplishments. For example, I try to make sure that the new lawyers coming into my office know that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built many of the beautiful monuments in the nations Capital. It is a small part of our contributions to the nation, but they are shining examples to point to with pride.

Create opportunities for your colleagues to talk about their contributions. People will talk enthusiastically about their work. Just ask them. It does not have to be formal presentations. In fact, it is better to do this informally, one on one, or in small groups. The enthusiasm will be contagious, and people will start talking about each others contributions with pride. Pride spreads quickly.

Defend our profession. Return dignity to public service by deserving it and defending it. Each one of us must defend all of us when our profession is under attack. Be informed. Have the courage to confront anyone who maligns public service. Listen to their concerns. Attempt to correct them if they are misinformed. Help them keep their opinion in the proper perspective. In any event, make sure you leave them knowing that we work hard, and we care about what we do. There are enough of us to change the public sentiment. Tell them, **“We are proud to be public servants!”**.

Pride in our work, our organization and our nation motivates us. Our reward is the knowledge that we have served the public. In the past, the promise of continued service was often the reward for good service. Current downsizing trends have eliminated employment security as a benefit of public service. Money has never motivated people to enter or remain in public service. The salaries are simply not comparable to our private sector counterparts. Every day public servants give more than they get. In fact, today in government, public servants are asked to accomplish more, in less time, with fewer resources. And we do. We do it by working harder and longer.

But it is not a thankless job. The gratitude of the nation, while seldom heard, can be seen daily, as millions of Americans take for granted the smooth operation of

our government programs. You see it in their quiet assurance that there will be roads where they need to go; weapons when there are battles to win, and help when they need it. Occasionally, the words of gratitude are spoken publicly. In his remarks to his family and the people of the United States on the evening of his reelection, President Clinton thanked "the employees of the nation's government". He said:

They have had to do a remarkable job. We have reduced the size of our government to its smallest point since President Kennedy served, and yet they have continued to serve the people better year in and year out. They had to do it in the face of enormous challenges and outright hatred for momentary periods. They have had to live with the horror of Oklahoma City and the difficulties that came along the way. But the people who serve us deserve our thanks, and I thank them."

Our government will only be as good as we as a nation believes it to be. It is time to restore our personal and national pride in public service. Seize every opportunity to communicate your achievements, and recognize and applaud your colleagues successes. To do so will rekindle your pride and lift the spirit of the nation by renewing their confidence in government. Lead the chorus -- be proud of your public service, so that others might be proud of public servants.