



**Remarks by Lester Edelman
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Note: From 1979 to 1998, Mr. Edelman served as U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Chief Counsel and Senior Policy Advisor to the USACE Commander.

As we meet at this moment in time, we are all inundated with screaming words and with silent thoughts of sequestration, forced furloughs, job security and budget cuts. I can only imagine the real pain that has been afflicted on each and every one of you, your families and your colleagues as each day you just honestly and faithfully perform your work.

Nevertheless, the best evidence of what the Army Corps of Engineers thinks of each and every one of you is your presence today here in Virginia. Just think how easy it could have been for the agency to scrub this year's Planning Associates Program and the travel expenses that goes with it. The decision to go on with the Program is a testament to the value and confidence placed not only in the Program but in each of you individually and collectively. Obviously your records have indicated that you have both the ability and the likelihood to contribute to the nation's well being.

As a veteran of many, many budget issues over my 40 years of government employment including a one-day RIF early in my career, but still not trying to minimize the present day problems, let me assure you that this too will pass.

For most of the time that you will spend with the Planning Associates you will be involved in exercising those quadrants of the brain that involve the cerebral processes, the more cognitive and intellectual part of the thinking process. I would ask your brief indulgence while we move to the lower right quadrant of the brain – the C Quadrant - that involve feelings and is where you connect with people.

Rather than offer a new approach to management or share a commentary on current or historic events shaping federal service, I want to share some feelings about federal public service.

In meetings such as this 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. However, essential to the success of each of these efforts is an attitude, or mindset that every public servant must possess – pride in public service. We all began our careers as accountants, engineers, librarians, lawyers, secretaries, scientists, economists, planners or members of one of the endless list of specialties necessary to support federal programs.

We became federal servants when we chose to direct our skills and talents toward serving our country. At that moment our professions changed! We were no longer solely 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, and a sense of insecurity and lack of vision follow. Leadership, flexibility, and innovation are lost. Most importantly, communication 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 other's interest, 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.

When I arrived in the US 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 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 kept 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 39 years of public service, including 28 at the Corps of Engineers and 11 on the Hill working for the Congress. I was never told that I could not or should not do something that I believed worthy of doing. Even as a lawyer new 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 ballistic missile systems program that was designed to overcome what has been described as the “Kennedy missile gap.” Along with the rest of the country, those of us who worked in that program felt our work was critical to maintaining peace.

We were the good guys! None of the people for whom tragedy was averted by the existence of those missiles know who I am or what I did; and that is not important. It does not diminish, all these years later, my feelings of contribution. The opportunity to contribute to a nationally significant program was and continues to be awesome.

That’s why I could say – I’m proud to be a public servant!

Subsequently, people in the nuclear missiles system business might not have been 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.

Inevitably, yesterday’s cool guy will be tomorrow’s uncool guy. This partially explains why public servants are often faced with public disdain. 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 these programs function. Most often their complaints are broad generalizations about 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 downsizing of the federal government in the last two decades. More importantly for those who remain, I fear it has undermined the pride public servants 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 contribution 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 sometime characterized as arrogance or conceit. Certainly we’ve all been told that humility is an honorable characteristic, but I am not suggesting we

glorify individuals. I want to glorify your work and your contributions. 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 we do.

There is no greater service than service to the public. Many of your counterparts in the private sector provide service to the public. The difference between their contribution and that of a federal public servant is that the public benefit is a byproduct of their quest for profit. The public service is the public servant's 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 we were still considered the good guys.

These colleagues need to be mentored. We must help them understand the role of their contributions to our nation's health. 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 proactive. Leaders in government – and I consider you to be leaders - 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 individual. I am proud to be a public servant. Say it everyday.

Share the Heritage of Your Organization. As families pass their history from one generation to the next, we should endeavor to ensure that everyone in the organization is aware of at least our proudest accomplishments. For example, I tried to make sure that new lawyers coming into my office knew that the US Army Corps of Engineers built many of the beautiful monuments in the nation's capital. It is a small part of our contributions to this 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. They do 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 other's contribution with pride. Pride spreads quickly.

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 employee security as a benefit of public service. Money has never motivated people to enter or remain in public service. Don't let anyone tell you differently, the salaries are simply not comparable to the private sector. Every day conscientious 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 they do. They do it by working harder and longer.

But it is not a thankless job. The nation's gratitude, while seldom heard, can be seen daily as millions of Americans take for granted the smooth operation of 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 the government to the 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 a momentary period. 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 believe 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. President Obama in his first day in office said: "However long we are keepers of the public trust, we should never forget that we are here as public servants, and public service is a privilege. It's not about advantaging yourself. It's not about advancing your friends or your corporate clients. It's not about advancing an ideological agenda or the special interests of any organization. Public service is, simply, and absolutely, about advancing the interests of Americans. "

The men and women in this room understand this, and that's why you are here. All of you are committed to building a more responsible, more accountable government.

Bob Dawson, Rick Capka and I along with our colleagues at Dawson & Associates are proud of each and every one of you for your good work on behalf of all of us. And for that we thank you!

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