

LESSONS LEARNED

by Bill Thomson

I am deeply honored to receive the administrator of the year award. I am well aware of the qualifications and stature of those who have previously received this award.

I want to congratulate you tonight on your decision to enter public service – and by public service I include both government and the non-profit sector. Even with the current economic crisis and its effects on government employment, I think you have made a great choice. I am confident that each of you will eventually find the employment you seek and establish successful careers. It may take a little longer than you hope, but the Lord will help you, he always does.

If I asked each of you why you are entering public service I am fairly confident that most, if not all, of you would say that part of the reason you are entering public service is because you want to make a difference, and you want to help others. And, the truth is that public service will give you the opportunity to achieve those goals. What's more, public service needs your talent and abilities more than ever before. Governments at all levels and non-profit organizations are about to lose a disproportionate share of their senior managers and leaders through the retirement of baby boomers such as myself. Further, this is occurring at a time when our society, and the world in general, are facing unprecedented challenges. As members of the Church we recognize the turmoil that is occurring in the world, and we know that it will increase in the last days. We need to recognize that the persons in public service will be at the forefront of responding to the physical, social, and moral disasters ahead. In the times ahead, public service will be challenged as never before. And so, you are more needed now in public service, than any generation before you.

Not only are you needed in public service, but looking at you tonight, I firmly expect each of you will eventually be in leadership roles in public service. You

have been given the talents and abilities to lead, and this MPA program is designed to prepare you to lead.

In my Office we have a practice of conducting “Lessons Learned” sessions after we finish an audit. We find it is helpful to sit down and analyze what went right, what went wrong, and what we might do differently in the future. These “Lessons Learned” not only help the audit team to grow from its experience, but they also help other teams that come behind them. In that spirit I have felt a desire to share with you 4 “Lessons Learned” from my career that might help you in your careers.

Lesson Learned #1 - Always pursue excellence

I hope you discover the joy and the energy that come from pursuing excellence. I was fortunate when I graduated from the MPA program to be hired by Dr. Lennis Knighton who had just taken a 2-year leave of absence from this program to become Utah’s first Legislative Auditor General. Len had always been a demanding professor with high standards and I wasn’t surprised that he carried these traits over into his new job. But, I remember as he started the new Office he talked about his vision of building one of the best Offices in the nation. Somehow, that goal resonated with me - I believed we could do it and we built an Office to be proud of. More important, that goal of trying to be the best stayed with me through my career. Three years later I moved to Arizona when it created a new performance audit function. I wasn’t the head of the new division at that time, but I made it one of my goals to help the Arizona Office become one of best offices in the country. I have never relinquished that goal and I have tried to instill it in those I work with. The reason I mention this is not to brag about my Office – although we do consistently receive much national recognition – but because of the effects that pursuing excellence has had on me and my career.

I found that pursuing excellence, continually striving to be the best, brings an energy and focus into your work. It keeps the joy alive. I believe this pursuit brings at least 3 important things to you and your organization. 1) It provides a unifying goal for you and those you work with – it enlists people in a cause. All of us want to be part of something great; no one joins an office saying I really hope this will

be a mediocre organization. 2) It makes you assess and focus on what you are really trying to accomplish, your real purpose. If you want to be the best you need to first decide just what it is you are going to be the best at. For example, my job as an auditor is not to write audit reports, my job is – as our Office vision statement says – to be a catalyst for improving government. Knowing what my role is then allows me to concentrate on the best ways to accomplish the role. 3) Striving for excellence forces you to constantly learn new things, apply new techniques, and perhaps most important, to keep an open mind. The saying that “nothing is as constant as change” is a true saying and to be the best and remain the best you must keep changing. And, you will generally have to look outside of yourself and your organization to do so. The futurist Joel Arthur Barker who wrote *The Business of Paradigms* maintains that most significant new developments - or as he refers to them “paradigm shifts”- come from the outside. The good news is that to pursue being the best you don’t need to come up with all the new ideas, you just need to be looking for them, recognize them and then apply them. But that process of looking for and evaluating new ideas will keep you energized and interested. I have had an unusual experience in that I have worked for the same organization for over 30 years – I am quite confident none of you will do that. But I can truthfully say that no two of those years were the same experience, in large part because of the new things we are constantly bringing into our Office. We were one of the first State audit offices to move to the use of personal computers, to produce videos summarizing our audit results, to develop a high level mentoring program, to use community volunteers on our audit teams, to develop a brand and logo for our products, and the list goes on and on. Some of these initiatives we have continued, some we have replaced, but the key is we have always been changing.

I think you should also realize that you do not need to be the agency director to pursue excellence and to have an impact on others. Jim Collins, author of the management book *Good to Great* has written an accompanying monograph entitled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*. In it he makes a very important observation – that you can build pockets of greatness in your organization even if you do not have executive powers. He relates the story of Roger Briggs a high

school physics teacher in Boulder, Colorado who wanted to make public schools better. After becoming the chair of his high school's science department he decided he couldn't necessarily change the education system, or his district, but he could change his 14 person department. He began by refusing to support tenure for teachers that were not great teachers – he took the position that average teachers were not good enough. Ultimately he changed the whole culture of his science department. I submit that each of us can do the same thing, whatever our position is, we can create our own pocket of greatness.

Len, I want to publicly thank you for the influence you have had on me, and its effects on my entire career.

Lesson Learned #2 – Leadership is really about relationships

The further you go in your career the more your success will depend on other people. You must, of course, have the necessary technical skills for your field. There are clearly abilities and knowledge that must be mastered or you will go nowhere. That is a given. However, once you have those skills, as you progress in your career it will be your relationships with others that largely determine your success. In fact, it has always impressed me that the higher I have risen in my organization, the less control I have of the actual day-to-day audit work and the more my success depends on others.

It took me a while in my career to learn that leadership is less about skills and techniques and more about relationships. As I have grown to understand that fact, it has helped me become more effective as a leader, and happier in my career. However, in saying leadership is about relationships, I am not saying leaders have to be charismatic. Personality is not the issue – interactions are. Your success will depend on how you conduct yourself with others in at least 3 areas:

The first area is your integrity. I am not going to belabor this, and as graduates of this institution this should be a given for you. But, you should also know that study after study shows that the #1 characteristic people look for in a leader is honesty or integrity. And, over the past two decades the percentage of people

selecting honesty is actually increasing, perhaps because we have seen so much publicity about dishonest leaders. Whatever you do, guard your integrity.

The second area is showing respect to others. Jim Kouzes, one of the authors of the book *The Leadership Challenge* says that his research shows that one of the best predictors of a leaders' effectiveness is whether people around him or her believe the leader treats them with dignity and respect. Obviously, you need to show respect to all persons – from the custodian to the chief executive. And, you need to show respect in all settings. But, let me tell you what I mean when I talk about showing respect. Respect is not just the absence of rudeness or arrogance. When I speak of respect I am speaking of giving feedback or criticism without wounding feelings. Of learning how to disagree without being disagreeable, of learning how to acknowledge another's viewpoint, even if we don't agree with it. I think much of it comes down to not losing sight of the people involved as we go through our processes. I have learned that there are at least two things that I can do to help me show respect. The first is a practice that Stephen R. Covey teaches and that is to *Seek first to understand, and then to be understood*. I have found that if before I give feedback to someone, if I try to understand how they arrived at their conclusion, or what their thought process was behind an action, that I can actually give them better feedback. Often, to make sure that I really understand I will re-state in my own words what they have told me and ask if they concur with my statement. The second practice is one I would only discuss in a setting such as this. That practice is to pray for charity towards those you work with. The charity I am speaking of is, of course, the charity Mormon talks about. I can testify that if you pray for it you will receive it, and if you receive it you will find it influences all of your inter-actions. People can feel if you have a love for others and will respond to it in even the most difficult circumstances. For example, one of the most difficult things you will ever have to do in your careers is fire someone. It may sound strange, but I still have excellent relations with several people I have had to terminate, I believe in large part because they know that I really cared about them even though I had to fire them.

The third area involving your relationships with others is - and I wish I had learned it much earlier in my career – is to regularly seek feedback on how your

actions are affecting the performance of your peers and those you lead. For some reason we seem to have trouble remembering that others may not view our actions the same way we do. As a very wise administrator once pointed out to me, we know the intent behind our actions and we judge our actions in light of that intent. But, others do not know our intent, all they can see are our actions. Therefore we generally do not know how our actions are perceived and/or how we are affecting others. If you have good relationships with the people you work closely with, they may occasionally give you some unsolicited feedback if they see some problems developing - but you can't count on it. No one likes to give negative feedback, particularly if it is unsolicited, and especially if it is to your boss. I was fortunate that some of the people I worked with did at times, give me some much needed feedback and helped me make some course corrections before small issues became big ones. I can remember one time my 3 direct reports asked to meet with me. I walked into the conference room and they were all sitting in a group at one end of the table and the chair for me was at the other end of the table. That setting alone said volumes about what they wanted to discuss. One of the things was that I was getting too removed, spending too much time in my Office and not interacting enough with the people in our division. Feedback like that is invaluable – but you probably won't get it if you don't regularly ask for it. And, too few leaders regularly ask for it. I encourage you to make it a practice to regularly ask for that feedback.

Lessons Learned #3 and #4

It is a funny thing, but most organizations expect you to join them in an entry level position and then work your way up to leadership. There is also a saying that “where you stand depends on where you sit.” When you get in that entry level position your perspective may not be the same as your boss', so I'd like to share with you 2 Lessons Learned that I see from a boss' perspective. I believe both can be very critical in helping you get a good start in your career. In doing so, I am not going to talk about your technical skills, but about some of your attitudes.

Lesson Learned #3 - Be positive.

Our world and most organizations are filled with negative people. I don't know of any organization that simply has too many positive people. People with positive attitudes stand out. If all other things are equal, a person who is positive will always have an advantage in terms of being recognized. But, it is not just about recognition. Being positive actually leads to better performance in at least two ways. 1) Being positive builds energy, while being negative drains it. Let me give you a simple, but common example. Consider the effect of how you respond to the everyday greeting "How are you?" If you say "I'm OK" there is really no change. But, if you say, with some enthusiasm in your voice "I'm doing great" you will find you feel more energy and so does the person you speak to. On the other hand, you will never leave work more tired than on the days that you spend your time griping about your organization. 2) Being positive increases our creativity. And, this fact is being recognized more and more in management related literature and activities. In fact, as part of my Office's strategic planning process we have come across a different model for strategic planning called Appreciative Inquiry that has been developed by two professors at Case Western Reserve University. Much of this strategic planning process is based on a focus on the positives in an organization. There is also an excellent book on problem solving called *Leadership Made Simple* by Ed Oakley. This book outlines a 5-step problem-solving model. However, unlike most problem solving models that begin by analyzing the problem, this model begins – no matter how big or serious the problem is - by looking at "what is already working" even if those things seem small. The persons who have developed Appreciative Inquiry and the problem solving model both maintain that focusing first on the positive produces greater energy and creativity that leads to more successful outcomes.

Lesson Learned #4 - Be Grateful.

I hope you make it a practice to express gratitude for things you receive and, something even more difficult to do, I hope you learn to be grateful for other peoples' successes.

We sometimes forget that bosses are people too. All of us appreciate a word of thanks. Let me give you an example. My boss and I sponsor an employee

appreciation event each year. Because we are a state agency, she and I personally pay for the cost of putting on the event for our 200 employees. Do our employees deserve it- YES. Do we do it so we can get thanked – NO. But, I can pretty much name for you which employees will come by each year and thank us. The same goes for promotions, salary increases, etc. I generally know which employees will express thanks. That doesn't mean they are going to be treated specially, but there is a good will built. And never underestimate the importance of good will in the workplace.

Finally, I would also encourage you to do something harder – be grateful for other peoples' successes. If someone who has been with your organization the same time you have is promoted and you are not, can you be glad for their success despite your own disappointment? Many of us are very competitive and we may have difficulty seeing anyone “get ahead” of us. However, learning to be glad for other people's successes is very important. It took me a long time to learn, but I found that once I learned to be glad for other peoples' successes I have been better able to understand why they are successful, and to learn from them what I can do to be more successful myself. I spent too much time earlier in my career not being grateful for others' successes and nothing good ever came out of it. But, as I have learned how to be glad for others' successes, they have generally gone out of their way to help me succeed. I believe the gospel principle that we reap what we sow applies to gratitude.

In closing, I want to thank the Romney Institute and faculty for this award. I am truly honored. I also want to thank you students for listening patiently to me. And, I want to wish you great success. You are in the right place, at the right time, and are needed in public service more than ever.

Thank you.

