

THE EXECUTIVE CIVIL SERVANTS' TRAINING SYSTEM OF THE UNITED STATES

Dr. Matthew Stafford¹

The United States' (US) Constitution offers little guidance specific to the subject of civil service. It merely notes that the President: 'shall appoint ... all Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for'. For years, US civil servants were Presidential appointees, with each new Administration bringing its own cadre of loyal workers. Government survived these transitions of power only because each new administration recognized the value of experience and, consequently, practiced some degree of moderation on coming into office, replacing many but not all civil servants from the previous administration.

The situation changed with the inauguration of Andrew Jackson in 1831. Invoking what came to be known as 'the spoils system', Jackson replaced such a large portion of the Federal workforce with his personal supporters that there was cause for concern. The 'spoils system' was based on the quotation, 'to the victor go the spoils'; personal interests superseded those of the nation, resulting in greed and corruption.

In response, certain politicians argued for the civil service corps being above greed and corruption and the competitive nature of politics. They envisioned a civil servant corps with professional ethics, ensuring that public service remained the first and greatest concern. Through a series of laws, beginning with the Pendleton Act of 1883, they created a civil service not appointed but hired and promoted, based on merit. It was not subject to political pressures but functioned for the public good, being built around values emphasizing public service over individual or party gain.

Although the US Civil Service still adheres to the idea of 'service-before-self', as envisioned by its founders, it has changed. Public pressure brought competency examinations in 1883 but advocacy groups later eliminated these. Other rights and privileges for civil

¹ *Dean of Faculty, Federal Executive Institute of the Office of Personnel Management of the United States of America*

servants have been captured in statutes, such as the right to join unions, gain protection from discrimination and to receive military-like honours on death - for life-time career contribution: all have been written into the law. One of the most striking modifications to the Civil Service occurred in 1978, when the US Congress passed the Civil Service Reform Act, creating the Senior Executive Service. This Service consists of a group of very senior and talented executive leaders, who can move across governmental agencies to solve problems and ensure that the interests of individual agencies remain subordinate to the greater public good.

Today's developmental approach

Following this brief background of the US Civil Service, let's shift our attention to the way in which the US invests in its public servants. This begins with the 'swearing-in ceremony'; just like the President of the United States, upon taking office, each new civil servant swears an oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. This oath is made to the principles and ideals embedded within the Constitution and the governmental framework it describes. As noted previously, the US Civil Service is not addressed in the Constitution directly. The oath marks the important subordination of individuality to the nation and is the first step taken by each civil servant in adopting the national values so clearly evident in the Constitution.

Beyond this common starting point, however, civil servant career development is decidedly individualistic in the early stages. Each post within the Service has a job description, outlining general duties to be performed. Within each job, however, the civil servant and supervisor jointly decide upon 'performance elements' covering specific areas for assessment and evaluation. The elements are detailed in terms of quality and quantity, so that employees know exactly what is expected of them.

Each civil servant creates an 'individual development plan' outlining their developmental initiatives; this can include education, training and experiential activities to be pursued over the coming year, to enhance capabilities and performance. The supervisor ensures that the requested developmental activities are in line with the needs

of the office, agency and government as a whole and then oversees the civil servant's progress in these developmental efforts. Failure to achieve progress in one's personal development plan can affect performance appraisal; failure to complete required training, for instance, could contribute to a poor performance assessment.

In essence, there are three types of training within the United States Civil Service:

- job-specific – 'technical training';
- that common to all federal employees – 'recurring training' - covering such topics as diversity, computer security and ethics; and
- training specific to leadership growth.

Of these three types, only 'recurring training' is required for all US civil servants, either periodically or as a positional requirement. In terms of periodic training, agencies post training requirements and a date by which these must be completed by all employees.

Positional requirements are specific to a given job or set of responsibilities. For instance, prior to becoming a supervisor in the Office of Personnel Management, a candidate must complete four online training courses, covering:

- an overview of personnel management;
- measuring performance;
- assessing and addressing poor performance; and
- mentoring fundamentals.

Except for such training requirements, most of the training received by civil servants is addressed through individual training plans, as described previously.

To aid supervisors in creating individual training plans specific to technical training, governmental agencies routinely offer 'career path guidance', offering specific training opportunities to help individuals decide which training will prove most valuable. Individual employees can demonstrate initiative by accelerating personal, technical development or can decide not to pursue all the available opportunities and remain at a lower level of expertise, as reflects their mindset.

To facilitate leadership development to progressively higher levels of responsibility, the Office of Personnel Development – the regulatory bureau for personnel policy within the United States Government – works with governmental agencies across 28 leadership competencies: specific skill sets deemed desirable or necessary. These help guide supervisors in selecting developmental opportunities for their employees. Competencies are aligned along five Executive Core Qualifications: areas specific to success at the most senior levels of Federal public service. In all cases, courses are developed to address specific competencies, so that employees and their supervisors can select opportunities specific to individual needs.

**EXECUTIVE CORE QUALIFICATIONS (ECQS)
AND LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES**

ECQs and the Leadership Competencies				
Leading Change	Leading People	Results Driven	Business Acumen	Building Coalitions
Creativity and Innovation	Conflict Management	Accountability	Financial Management	Partnering
External Awareness	Leveraging Diversity	Customer Service	Human Capital Management	political Savvy
Flexibility	Developing Others	Decisiveness	Technology Management	Influencing / Negotiating
Resilience	Team Building	Entrepreneurship		
Strategic Thinking		Problem Solving		
Vision		Technical Credibility		

Although the list appears long, those who wish to pursue advancement within civil service must endeavour to master all these leadership competencies, investing individual effort to achieve universally desired outcomes.

To aid civil servants in achieving growth in these areas, the government offers a wide variety of developmental opportunities. In essence, these opportunities fall into three categories: training, education and experience. The distinction between them is not academic but is important to building and delivering developmental opportunities to achieve desired outcomes.

Training is designed to produce specific reactions to known stimuli. It emphasizes cognitive and tactile learning. People are trained

to respond to fire alarms or to protect computers from malicious software or computer attacks, to fill out forms and use equipment properly.

In addition to training, there is the need for education, since this focuses on the cognitive and affective domains of learning and helps people decide on courses of action when they encounter new, unknown stimuli. It equips them to overcome challenges, using innovative and creative approaches to solving problems.

Education also helps inculcate values; we do not develop an abhorrence for dishonesty and corruption through rote memorization and basic testing, or a sense of ecological responsibility. Such values are nurtured through education and mentoring and, preferably, through interactive, experiential learning. Training alone does not encourage innovative thinking. Education and experience must be integrated to produce such employees.

Experience provides opportunities to apply what has been learned through training and / or education. Supervisors can encourage this by placing employees in various situations which will test their areas of expertise – often called ‘broadening’ – or by moving them into positions of greater trust or responsibility. The orchestration of experience can substantially increase the benefits of training or education and is a key consideration in shaping each civil servant’s career path.

In very simple terms, training prepares us for the known, education for the unknown and experience provides opportunities to apply learning. How often do civil servants encounter the unexpected? Quite often! Charles Caleb Colton noted that tests can be formidable even for the best prepared because it is always possible to ask more questions than any one person can answer. The citizens of our collective nations are asking more questions than our civil servants can possibly answer. New situations arise almost daily. Clearly, our civil servants need more than rules and regulations to guide them in navigating these unfamiliar waters; they need an underpinning of principles and values from which they can draw, to guide their actions for the benefit of the governments and people they serve. Clearly, civil servants also need experience. No amount of training

or education can prepare them to engage successfully with a hostile member of their citizenry or to address the less routine issues they will face in their careers. Success in such endeavours takes practice. Through experience, supervisors can assess the effectiveness of governmental training or education, as civil servants gain opportunities to reinforce their learning through application.

The United States Civil Service uses training, education and experiential learning in its approach to leadership development. Some competencies, such as communications and problem-solving, can be advanced through simple training opportunities. Most, however, also require education. Discussions on creativity, customer service, team-building and negotiating clearly require in-depth study. Undoubtedly, there are always constraints in the form of available time, money and resources.

To meet the developmental needs of its civil service, with an eye toward resources, the United States Government offers various paths to development. There are individual, computer-based classes available through e-Learning sites, as well as resident and blended-learning courses, offered through organizations like the Office of Personnel Management's Center for Leadership Development. In addition, courses are offered through private-sector providers and public institutions of learning.

Of course, governments also set the values and principles that guide its organizations and the people who serve them. In the case of the United States, national values are reflected in the Constitution and through various Amendments passed over the years, to keep the Constitution relevant to the nation's needs. These values are integrated into the agencies that have arisen within the Constitutional structure and are inculcated through the various developmental programmes described above. The result is a singularly committed yet heterogeneous civil service: professionals who recognize and use diverse skills, talents, education, training and experience for the good of their government. There are experts and novices, specialists and generalists, employees who specialize in customer service and those specializing in administrative or managerial processes. They are unique individuals who work as a team, focused in supporting a common purpose and common values. This approach has proven

highly effective; however, there is always room for growth and improvement. Technological innovations and the ability to engage with one another almost anytime and anyplace are changing the way in which governments can train and educate employees. Training needs to be applied responsibly, to enhance commitment and effectiveness in the interest of improved public service.

One outcome of our advanced capability for technological communication is our dramatically enhanced collaborative capabilities. Although collaboration is valuable in most learning situations, it is vitally important to the success of any civil service. Questions that exist within any office, agency or ministry may have already been answered in another. Improvements in efficiency and effectiveness in one endeavour may be applicable to another or may, at least, be adaptable, to create similar, positive outcomes. It is desirable that we craft mechanisms and policies to make use of this capability within our individual governments. The US Center for Leadership Development is already implementing such an approach.

As experts in and practitioners of public service, we should also seek opportunities to expand collaboration across international borders. Although languages and organizational structures differ widely, as civil servants – whether elected or appointed – we share similar values. We share, for instance, a commitment to our government and, more importantly, to the people of our individual nation. In most instances, we work for less money than our private-sector counterparts and do not enjoy the same level of prestige or privilege; yet, our service is at the heart of the success of our individual nations and the services offered to our people.

These common values – self-sacrifice, service before self and an unflagging faith in people to unite in resolving social problems – links us as an international family. Like a family, we are not in competition with one another but can and should rejoice in one another's successes. To maximize the power of this familial relationship, we need to be willing and open to sharing not only our successes but – although frightening at times – our failures.

The 2013 Astana Economic Forum and World Anti-Crisis Conference are excellent steps in the right direction, as is the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Civil Service Hub, which is being headquartered in Astana. Kazakhstan is taking important steps towards creating an international consortium of civil servants dedicated to excellence in the public sector. It is up to us all to continue contributing to this important effort. Together, we can share lessons learned and enhance the quality of public service. This will become part of our collective development, making us more efficient and more effective public servants for our nations.

Thank you for your time and attention.