

# “Leadership in the Public Service”

Notes for Remarks by James R. Mitchell  
at the  
Induction of New Executives

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## **Introduction**

- Good morning. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to speak to you today.
- This is an important occasion for you as new EX's. It's also an opportunity for me to say some things about a subject that has been on my mind for a long time. My topic today is leadership – or as the program says, “Leadership in our times: meeting the expectations of government”.
- I want to talk about the unique challenges of Public Service leadership, and the particular qualities required of Public Service leaders today.
- Becoming an effective leader is probably the single most important challenge you will face as you advance in your careers as executives in the Public Service.
- And as you know, leadership is one of the five priorities set by the Clerk of the Privy Council for his stewardship of the Public Service. (Do you know the others? They are *accountability*, *teamwork*, *excellence* and *renewal*. Each of those subjects is worth a speech by itself.)
- In his remarks to the ADM Forum in April, Kevin Lynch said that leadership is “the most important characteristic of a senior public servant”. In subsequent remarks to the Manager's Forum in St. John's, he described leadership as being about “engaging employees and clients, setting the agenda, taking risks and being a role model”.
- He's right about all of that. And he is certainly right to make leadership a top priority.

## **What is leadership?**

- What is leadership?
- This is a question we've all thought about from time to time, usually prompted by encounters with people who exemplify – or not – the qualities we would like to see in a leader.
- Leadership is not a quality or skill that comes naturally to everyone, though some people seem to be, as we would say, “born leaders”. Most people who become leaders, though, develop their leadership skills over time, through experience in tough situations, through exposure to role models, and through training at places like the Canada School.
- The Canadian Forces believe in leadership training – they spend enormous effort instilling the qualities and skills of leadership in all the people they bring into their organization. And they do a very good job of it.
- Interestingly, they don't subscribe to the view that leadership is primarily an executive skill – they teach leadership at all levels, from Corporal to General Officer. And they are right to do so.

- One thing we know is that leadership is not something that comes with the job, like a bigger office or more staff or the privilege of flying business class on long flights to Vancouver. It is a quality that is manifest in the *person* who has the job.
- As Kevin said, leadership ability is the key requirement for an executive in the Public Service – more important (in my view) than knowledge, or experience, or education; vastly more important than who you know or how well you get along with your boss. It's more important – dare I say it – even than the ability to manage.
- Leadership ability is not 'more important' than personal qualities like integrity or courage – it includes them.
- But if you want a definition of leadership, then here is mine – not better than others, perhaps, but worth thinking about.
- I would define a leader as someone who knows their duty and has the courage to do it, while inspiring others to do the same, in a common purpose.
- The same basic definition of leadership applies inside or outside the Public Service, though how the *qualities* of leadership are exemplified may be different in the public sector than in the private sector.
- For you as Public Service executives, the common purpose that unites the leader and the people he or she is leading is defined in part by the elected government, in its declared policies and objectives.
- And it is defined as well by the enduring values – democratic, professional, ethical and people values – that are set out so clearly in the *Public Service Values and Ethics Code*.
- Think about the components of the definition I just gave you – *duty, courage, shared purpose*.
  - To be a leader, an executive must first know their duty – that duty is service to the government and people of Canada. An executive who focuses their efforts or their staff on a personal agenda rather than the Minister's is no leader.
  - An executive who lacks the courage to do what's right is no leader. Because, in the end, no one will follow him (or her).
  - An executive who cannot define an objective, or who leads from behind, is no leader.
- It's worth pointing out that the other things that Kevin is talking about are also elements of this most important of all executive qualities, which is leadership.
- Let's think about a few of these concepts for a minute.

## Teamwork

- Start with teamwork. An effective leader in government must be a team player. There is no room at the top for lone wolves. They may get there, but they won't last. Why not? Because, as you know, there is virtually nothing you can do in government "on your own", or with just your troops or your sector.
- You have to be able to work with other executives, to mobilize their cooperation and to leverage the capabilities of their organizations and their people in the pursuit of your objectives and the fulfillment of your responsibilities.
- Leadership within a community of other senior leaders is one of the things your staff are counting on you to deliver as an executive in the Public Service.

## Engagement

- Let's talk for a minute about *engagement*. You know as well as I do that the successful leader in government is someone who inspires people to work with them.
- The weight of authority is never enough. If you simply tell people which way you want them to go, chances are pretty good they won't get there. They may not even start the voyage. But if you engage their imagination, their commitment and their sense of duty, they will follow you.

## Accountability

- *Accountability*. Is this a quality of leadership? Absolutely. To lead effectively in the Public Service means you have to take responsibility for what you – and your team – are doing. You have to be able to exercise authority and then to account to your bosses for what you have done with that authority.
- You have to be ready to stand up and be counted.
- Some of you have already had the experience of accounting before a Parliamentary committee for what's been done in a program, or for this or that administrative action in a department. That experience certainly sharpens one's appreciation of what it means to be in charge of something and then to face up to the consequences of what you've done.
- It also reminds you, as I've said before, that what you do as a Public Service leader is done on behalf of the Minister, and that when things go wrong, it is the Minister who will have to account to Parliament.

## Risk-Taking

- *Risk-taking*. Not a popular subject these days, for obvious reasons. But as the Clerk has said, the successful Public Service leader is someone who is prepared to take risks – within the bounds of law and policy – to achieve the goals set by the government.

- That's why they chose you – not just to avoid error, but to manage for results. That means using your judgment to assess what can be done, and what cannot or should not be attempted.

## Renewal

- Finally, *renewal*.
- Look around you. You are all part of the renewal of the Public Service. The challenge for you as new executives is to do your jobs while at the same time developing the next generation of Public Service leaders – the people who will deliver results for the government tomorrow.
- The best leaders are always engaged in developing their successors. The best leaders I've known were all terribly proud of the high quality people who worked for them. In fact, most of them would admit that they were always on the lookout for people who were *better* than they were – people who added skills or qualities that they did not themselves possess.
- Knowing your strengths, and respecting the strengths of those working for you – that's a sign of real leadership.

## ***Why is leadership important today?***

- Why is leadership such an important subject today?
- You are senior members of a great national institution, the Public Service of Canada, that has been around in more or less its present form for nearly 90 years. This institution, in which I was proud to be an executive, has always produced great leaders, and we have many strong leaders today.
- Each of you has known people who have inspired you through their leadership, and who serve, I'm sure, as role models for your own leadership style.
- I had the enormous good fortune to work directly under some of the greatest leaders of the modern Public Service – Paul Tellier, Jack Manion, Glen Shortliffe, Ian Clark.
- These were all people with a strong sense of duty and purpose as public servants. They were (and still are) courageous in recognizing the right thing to do, and doing it.
- I saw each of them, on occasions too numerous to count, give courageous advice, advice that may not always have been welcomed at the time by the politicians, but was always appreciated afterwards. And each of them had the capacity to inspire people like me to do our best, to give our best advice, to try always to do the right thing.
- Their leadership defined the ethos of the Public Service in which I spent my government career. I always felt that it was, in large part, their leadership that gave dignity to my work and to the work of my colleagues. It made the job fun, and made me proud to be a public servant.

- What is so special about leadership in *today's* environment? I can think of at least three reasons why it matters more today than perhaps ever before.
- The first is that this bureaucratic environment is in many ways more challenging than the one in which I worked as an EX.
  - The accountability regime is much more stringent, and there is a general mistrust of public servants that was not there 15 years ago.
  - Some of our most vital professional communities – finance, audit, HR, science, procurement, policy – you name it: they're all in urgent need of renewal. The average executive faces management challenges that simply did not exist ten or twenty years ago, and he or she has fewer tools to deal with them.
  - And as I mentioned, perhaps even more than your predecessors, one of your immediate tasks must be to develop the next generation of executives who will succeed you. The system badly needs a new generation of leaders, at all EX levels. It needs people with skills in all the areas I just mentioned; and it needs people who better reflect the changing face of Canada.
- Second, leadership matters today because in recent years the political situation has been more challenging for public servants than in the era of two-term majority governments.
  - In a minority environment, Ministers and their staffs are more sensitive to every little mistake; decisions are harder to get; and issues have a different priority than in more 'normal' times.
  - Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of a minority environment is that some problems that you know ought to be addressed are not, because politics won't allow it. But that's democracy.
- And third, because the Public Service today is going through a massive renewal that will see the replacement of the majority of the executive cadre over a period of little more than 5 years. You won't have the seasoned role models that we did – you will have to become the role models.

### ***What is it to be a leader at the Director level?***

- For starters, it should be fun, whether you do policy or operations, or both. It should be more fun than anything you've done before, and – I'm sorry to tell you – probably more fun than the jobs you will hold later as you advance in your careers.
- Those of you who are entering policy jobs will certainly experience this. My friend and colleague Andrei Sulzenko, himself one of the true policy leaders of his generation, observed the other day that it is as a Director or DG that one really has the most fun as a policy person in government, because that's where you're paid to figure out what to do; that's when it really is your job to have a point of view on big problems, and to be able to advance an argument – strongly but professionally – on what to do about them.

- The ADM and the Deputy are paid to decide. They're less in the idea business than in the responsibility and authority business. They're looking to you for leadership on ideas and options. That's a wonderful opportunity.
- The same kinds of opportunities exist for those of you who are making careers in program management. You carry the immediate responsibility for programs and resources; you make the decisions that affect front-line managers and employees; you are the ones who care most about how to achieve the goals of your program.
- For all of you, whatever your next job may be and wherever you're located, the same principles apply:
  - If you can do your duty with courage and decisiveness, with your eye on the ball and not on your boss, you will succeed. Your staff and your clients will respect you, and your bosses will too.
  - But if your focus is on managing upwards, on simply pleasing your boss or the Minister rather than doing your duty to the program and the client and the people who work for you, then you will miss the crucial leadership opportunity for an executive in government.
- Because one of the great tests of leadership – and one of the most significant rewards – is *autonomy*, the inner strength and inner direction that enables the leader to set a direction, to choose the right course of action over something easier, and to stand up for his or her staff.
- It's a simple idea – to lead, you have to have autonomy; and the better you lead, the more personal and professional autonomy you develop.
- Now let's keep this in perspective, autonomy does not mean complete independence.
  - You all work within a hierarchy that leads up to, and down from, the Minister.
  - The Deputy is your ultimate boss in the Public Service.
  - At the end of the day, the Deputy will decide on the advice that goes to the Minister, and on what you are to do as an EX within the department or agency in carrying out the Minister's direction.
- Remember – your first duty as an executive leader is to know your duty as a manager and as a person:
  - to run your program with prudence and probity;
  - to care about getting results within the bounds of law and policy;
  - to care for your people;
  - to give honest advice – to tell your boss what you think, and why;

- to do the whole job, and not to look to outside consultants to do it for you;
  - to take decisions that have to be made (that's why they made you an Executive);
  - and to respect the role and the decisions of those in authority over you.
- What makes you a leader is your readiness and your capacity to do all of this in a calm, professional manner that makes people want to be on your team.

### ***Bottom Line***

- Here is my final lesson about leadership in the Public Service today – it's not about you:
  - It's about the program and the people and the institution;
  - It's about service to Canadians. They're the reason you are in your jobs. Respect for the client, respect for the citizen, is a cornerstone of successful public service.
  - And perhaps most importantly, it's about democracy – you're there to serve the Minister as best you can, not to advance your career by avoiding hard choices or holding back difficult advice.
- Respect the job, respect your staff, respect the Minister. Do all this and people will respect you.
- That's leadership.

Thank you