

Date: Thu, Jun 14, 2012 at 9:04 PM
Subject: In Praise of Public Service, and Farewell
To: Daniel.Parker@doh.state.fl.us

If you are receiving this message, then I have hopefully left of my own accord, but I am most probably on leave pending being laid off, or simply relieved of my duties with the Florida Department of Health.

Well meaning friends would dissuade me from sharing my thoughts so publicly. To not "burn bridges". I hope to not do that with these words as I have always counseled colleagues and those in the work place to leave amicably. I am not overwhelmingly concerned with my present or future situation vs. what is occurring now in public service. And seeing this part of my public service career come to an end, I hope you'll be patient and allow a wisened middle-aged, mid-level manager share some perspective. Maybe some of the message will get through, before the messenger becomes the focus.

One of my roles has been more than as a regulator and an educator. As a manager, it is to ensure the voice of the average citizen or staff member, who may be too frightened or discouraged, can speak truth to power and ensure they get heard. In fact, the higher up one goes in management, whether private or public, the real significance of these positions is to not just fall in line but to ensure that honesty, ethics, credibility, feedback, and reality are given light and that things change accordingly. No business of significant worth functions with blinders on, with protecting the status quo or padding positions with friends or supporters. Public service is no exception to this. One makes a little more salary because one is expected to see the bigger picture, to perceive changes, to take a few more risks, to speak up for your people. Having spent most of my professional career of 17 years in public health, it has been difficult to watch a once proud agency succumb fairly quickly to neglect and erratic leadership. This has been done in the misguided belief that public service is not necessary, and people are as interchangeable as parts. This process of decline started in the previous administration and has now accelerated. The number of executive level leadership changes we have experienced in two years probably mirrors the last ten. The last ten probably mirror the previous 50.

How did this happen? We are victims of a false portrayal of public services as waste, coupled with a narrow view of what constitutes success in life. A small handful of our colleagues put their own self interest ahead of the agency, a majority of us across the state played it safe and went silent, and leadership simply looks for and installs malleable followers. Whether it is a purge, a centralization of power, or what other nations call a jihad, the trends are always the same wherever it occurs. When the majority of reasonable people put their heads down and keep quiet, bad things happen.

"While good men sit at home, not knowing that there is anything to be done, not caring to know; cultivating a feeling that politics are tiresome and dirty, and politicians vulgar bullies and braves; half persuaded that a republic is the contemptible rule of a mob, and secretly longing for a splendid and vigorous despotism -- then remember it is not a government mastered by ignorance, it is a government betrayed by intelligence

George William Curtis, editor of Harper's Weekly, 1876
a colleague of Theodore Roosevelt Sr.

Real leadership is rarely acknowledged because it usually abides quietly in the everyday practices that keep our neighborhoods safe, our food and water clean, that teach our children, that motivate us beyond our own perceived abilities, and that helps us in numerous anonymous ways. It is a dark day when we measure success by who you know, by wealth, or by simple political patronage. This boils leadership down to a very few rudimentary basics. If you are not succeeding, you are not using enough force, not saying the right things, thinking too independently, or wearing the wrong letter. If you do speak up, it better be something we want to hear. Such a definition of success values unseen handshakes, ideological zealotry, and shooting from the hip "gut" instinct over what has really been the hallmarks of progress in America: stable government, deliberative reasoning, consensus, candor, sound discretion, and science. The Department of Health has never been in a situation where it has had to address so many ideologues and egos, during a down economy, in a society made more risk averse by reflecting our beliefs outward instead of focusing on improvements inward. It has been the perfect storm. And the perfect cover for ignoring real public health issues such as universal access to healthcare, climate change, and building great places to live. This has led to effort being put on the *perception* of protecting public health rather than actually preventing public health problems. Jim Collins, the well-known author of business leadership, calls it selling through a "false democracy": http://bigthink.com/series/70/series_item/4981 Until a distracted society lifts its heads out of the sand to demand answers, or real journalism returns to search for and find the truth (without buddying up to the decisionmakers that are supposedly being kept honest), or a disaster of some kind strikes, no one knows that their public sphere, the public common goods, has steadily and slowly been eroded.

To those of you who carry on through all this, keep doing the good work you are doing. Don't give in to cynicism, fear, or apathy. If you have to stand up against something, do it. History is full of examples where people just went along to protect their position, their power, or their livelihood. Or they went along out of fear. And pretty soon your life is complete and your epitaph is, "she played it safe". History is also full of those who refused to go along with a suffocating norm, and paid the price of being deemed misloyal or "not on the team". Gandhi, Mandela, MLK, Hansen. Those are the people that worked to stop wars, to stop waste, to preserve common goods, and to challenge the group mentality. I think we see some of that in the streets being occupied around our cities now. We see it in those public servants who work to serve the public and get bullied for it. God bless 'em. That is what I tell students when I talk to them. Remember. It is in countries like China and Iran and Syria and North Korea where public protests and disagreements are not allowed. If we are to continue to represent something unique in the world, we really have to mean it. In the home of the brave, we have to take some appropriate risks, we have to be confident enough to accept and protect different beliefs, and we have to take some thoughtful initiative for the good of all. For the sake of quoting another "leader", democracy is messy. One has to be willing to work to protect truth telling and openness, no matter how hard to hear.

We have always worked to uphold the values of our division, identified many years ago over a series of retreats. I want to share them with you as a reminder of what we have always stood for and honored. I believe that had the department and capable executives kept such values to its core, we would look very different than we do today.

- Hire and keep the best staff
- Let managers manage
- Trust but verify
- Receive continuous feedback and continue to personally and professionally improve

- Ask, listen, and do
- Know the small stuff from the big stuff
- Innovate
- Challenge poor decisions
- Applaud great leadership at all levels
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Some day, in years to come, you will be wrestling with the great temptation, or trembling under the great sorrow of your life. But the real struggle is here, now, in these quiet weeks. Now it is being decided whether, in the day of your supreme sorrow or temptation, you shall miserably fail or gloriously conquer.

Character cannot be made except by a steady, long continued process. -- Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)
American Bishop

Inherent to public service is that we speak up. Our children will expect us to do better than to mortgage their future for the sake of going along now out of fear and aversion to taking a risk. We have to focus on the "we" more so than the "I". The concept of winners and losers is an old mindset in our age of being an enlightened and educated people. To get to work by throwing people out of work, cutting families off of their paychecks and their healthcare, is scandalous. Read the Department's Code of Ethics (DOHP 30-2-07) and decide whether it is being followed. Ethics depends on all of us, including leadership, to safeguard trust and honesty, to fight against bureaucracy. Ethics are not temporary, nor personality or politically driven:

*The Department of Health's (department) mission is to promote and protect the health and safety of all people in Florida through the delivery of quality public health services and the promotion of health care standards. In order to meet this challenge and **to uphold our values of excellence, commitment to service, accountability, empowerment, integrity, respect, and teamwork**, all department employees shall comply with Chapter 112, Part III, Florida Statutes (F.S.), and the requirements of this policy, which, in some circumstances, requires conduct beyond what is provided by law. **All employees are expected to use the powers and resources of the department to further the public interest and maintain the respect and trust of the people of their government.** Employees shall avoid any conduct, regardless of whether in the context of business, financial, or social relationships, which might undermine the public trust, regardless of whether that conduct is unethical or merely has the appearance of unethical behavior. **Employees are expected to safeguard their ability to make objective, fair, and impartial decisions.** By embracing a strong code of ethics, we will further our department vision: "By providing quality services and promoting healthy communities we are valued by those we serve and our partners as the leading public health organization in the nation." All employees, including those working at or representing the department at a location other than their usual workplace, are expected to communicate with courtesy and respect in dealing with clients, the public, and other employees.*

The true power of America has always been its people. We the people. That is only questioned by the continuation of the self made myth. The myth that believes it wasn't your teachers, or your park that you played baseball at, or your coaches, or your electricity being always available, or a doctor or dentist or prenatal care being available regardless of whether you could afford it, or a crossing guard at your children's school, or your student loan or grant to go to college, or disability income, or the nutritional facts on the food you buy, or the police or firewoman who took the night shift, the nurse who saw you in the emergency room, or the legal protections that keep you from being harmed, injured, or cheated. None of that matters. You and you alone made yourself. While we fight with each other

over this myth, a few con artists laugh and win. Our American identity becomes more and more narrowly defined and we ultimately protect only two things: control of power and control of money.

The workplace has greatly changed in the last two decades, yet some of the management thinking has not. People are motivated in different ways, and not necessarily by money or by force. One must be willing and secure enough to give up control. Release your people to do good things. Don't look for the wrong. Expect that ethical behavior and successful outcomes will happen. That scares the heck out of those who have been ingrained to see life as a series of rules, procedures, or people to direct. Those that equate wearing specific clothes, avoiding specific words, or having a clean desk as a sign of effectiveness. For many years Smuckers has been listed on the Fortune 500 list as one of the top companies to work for. Employee morale is high and employee turnover is low. Why is that? There are no major perks or incentives except for flex time and a 2% bonus each Christmas. Employees say it is because they are respected. Everyone is treated with care and consideration. Management listens. David Osborne in *Reinventing Government* said, "Innovation does not usually happen because someone at the top has a good blueprint. Often, it happens because good ideas bubble up from employees who actually do the work and deal with the customers." Only in a constructive environment not afraid to hear from its staff will that happen. See this great video for more on understanding motivation: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFjJc>

I am the last remaining member of the team from when I arrived in the Director's office here in Environmental Health in 1998. I served as an interim division director of 200 staff members and helped to hire Dr. Lisa Conti, the quintessential public servant, a public health woman of the year, who stood firm in the face of public disinvestment now running rampant, and paid the price for it. It is that moment when I knew there was no shame left in the department and when I first started to draft this message in preparation for my own departure. I leave behind some great staff I had the privilege of hiring and I have worked with some outstanding public servants and accomplished things I have the appropriate pride for. I am quite proud of the work I have been involved with, including:

- The PACE EH community assessment project (recognized as the best in the nation)
- Involved in the hiring decisions of many of our division leadership staff;involved in dismissal decisions where they were needed
- Annual strategic planning and business plans for over a decade
- Sustainability and leadership trainings in the department and online
- Member of three successful conflict mediations
- Incident Commander for the Department of Health during Hurricane Ivan (2004)
- Garnered department support for green teams, green planning, and proclamations
- Involved in first federal climate change grant awarded to DOH (\$100K+)
- Hiring of land use planners in public health (first on eastern coast of U.S.)
- DOH a member of US Green Building Council, and Smart Growth Network (first public health agency in nation)
- Supported initial moves by the department into telecommuting, handheld computers, smartphones, sharepoint, legislative tracking system, etc (now department standards)
- Created the original template for the Secretary's Quarterly Measures Report
- Supported the funding for first HIA in Florida (Taylor county coal plant)
- Pushed through a Smart Growth Agreement between 5 state agencies (took two years to complete and predates the federal partnership)
- Started annual division awards program for employee recognition

It is no wonder why people who left our division of environmental health came back to us, and why we were put up many times as a national environmental health model. The division was recognized nearly a decade ago in the Florida Sterling Challenge Feedback Report for having, “..created a comprehensive operational business plan that includes specific strategies, responsibilities, target dates, and status for each of their objectives.” We have always known how to work. We have always had great staff. And regardless of the effort to sell it as such, we were never broken.

In almost any occasion, there is growth. I can look back and realize those things I did right, the things I got wrong, and how much I have tremendously benefited with the opportunities given here. For that, I am thankful. I have plenty more to do and accomplish. As do you all who are still here. Fight for what is right, even quietly or anonymously. This time too shall pass. I came in as a natural optimist, a believer in the good, and a trained professional. I leave with that intact, without any anger, but concerned with what we come to accept. I will continue to work to leave a better place and a better government to those that come behind us. I want you to know that your work is greatly respected and will always be needed to protect the values of our country. You may contact me at anytime at 13scribes@gmail.com. And if you know someone who needs a competent professional somewhere, please contact me. My wife wants to see me re-employed, even part-time, as quick as possible! Until then, I'm going to do my best to become a public servant again, this time as an elected official on August 14th.

Theodore Roosevelt:

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best knows achievement and who at the worst if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat

From a speech given in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1910

My friends and colleagues,

Courage.

Most respectfully,

Daniel Parker

Daniel Parker, MSP
[Sustainability Director](#)

Division of Environmental Public Health
Florida Department of Health
(The Nation's first Public Health Partner in the Smart Growth Network)

Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Commissioner, 2005 - Present