



SPEAKING OUT

Leadership at State: A Work in Progress

BY PRUDENCE BUSHNELL

When I left the Foreign Service Institute in 1989 after three years heading up the Executive Development Division, I published an article in the *Foreign Service Journal* titled “Leadership at State: The Neglected Dimension.” That title pretty well summed up my assessment.

Fast forward 16 years. I have recently retired after 24 years of service, the last three spent as the dean of FSI’s Leadership and Management School. My assessment of leadership at State today? A work in progress.

“Take care of your people,” words absent from our vocabulary in 1989 but a mantra over the past few years, still echo for me. Over 4,500 colleagues at the middle and senior ranks have graduated from at least one of the mandatory leadership training courses with a common understanding of how and why leadership works. The results of the Office of Personnel Management’s 2004 Human Capital Survey show a stunning improvement over the 2002 survey in the opinions State Department employees hold of their supervisors. The ambassadorial and DCM seminars emphasize leadership responsibilities, and participants discuss them seriously. We can all name hardship posts with wonderful morale because of good leadership from the front office. And grass-roots initiatives are popping up all over — the Leadership Roundtable and YPro (Young Professionals) groups are just two that are fostering change.

And yet...

We have made progress, but the Foreign Service is still not an organization that values leadership across the board.



We are still not an organization that values leadership across the board. A boss may demonstrate leadership, or not. He or she may understand what it is, or not. Either way, it’s fine. Clearly, too many people still don’t get it: leadership is not some touchy-feely, people-related thing that’s nice to do if you have time after tending to process and paper. Nor does it mean serving the next person up the ladder exclusively, as if only people at the top can get something accomplished. And it’s not something you delegate to the head of your management team.

Rather, leadership is providing the vision, wherewithal and stewardship to enable others to achieve results — it’s leveraging your assets. It’s a job in and of itself, vital to policy and central to transformational diplomacy.

Value Leadership in Washington, Too

I’ve seen many more examples of leadership overseas than I have in

Washington. Of course, there are reasons for that. Overseas, the chief of mission has a letter signed by the president of the United States outlining his or her leadership responsibilities, and the accompanying accountability is clear. People taking ambassadorial and DCM assignments for the first time are obligated to attend preparatory seminars. At post, security and other concerns force every front office to pay increasing attention to purpose, organization and people. Employees and even “the system” are less tolerant of bad or indifferent leadership overseas and more inclined to take action against it. This has a trickle-down effect. If the top values leadership, others do, too.

The culture in Washington is different. Senior leaders, career and non-career alike, receive no written expectations of performance from the president; their work objectives are closely held. Many are too busy to attend senior-level seminars designed to enhance effectiveness in very complicated jobs. I’m not sure how many in leadership positions even consider themselves accountable for issues beyond those which relate directly to short-term policy goals. As a result, when I look at the department’s organizational chart, I know what the boxes stand for but I have no idea what leadership responsibilities reside in them. This, too, has a trickle-down effect.

Who, for example, is accountable for making sure we never again have to bury colleagues and family members because of insufficient security

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resources? Where does the buck stop when it comes to ensuring that all employees receive the training and development opportunities they need? Whose hand goes up if we have to ask why we do not have enough people, resources, or physical and technological support systems to do an effective job?

Not long before I retired from State, I heard the Government Accountability Office's comptroller general say that the federal government is going to have to get used to "doing more with less." I remember that refrain from the 1990s. I also remember the consequences. To whom do we now look to ensure we have the wherewithal to serve the president and the American people effectively and safely? Note that I'm not asking which box on the organiza-

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tional chart is responsible for that. I'm asking which *person*.

I know that working in Washington is different from working overseas and I know that we hold different expectations of the people in leadership positions. But I question whether the double standard serves

us and the American people well. Opaque, diffused responsibilities and poor accountability have created serious problems, past and present. Tongues cluck around town these days about the need for better management and leadership across the federal government. The absence of a resolution to these discussions continues to absolve everyone.

Let's Change the Culture

This reality impedes the department's transition to an organization that values leadership in all places and at all levels. But it doesn't have to be a show-stopper. We have choices. We can hope that non-career appointees will take charge of our stewardship for us. Or we can complain about career colleagues who don't "get it," assignment and promotion systems

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that aren't perfect, and resources that will never be sufficient. Or we can wait and hope that one day things will change ... maybe.

Or we can start taking responsibility for our organization ourselves. And I mean all of us, not just the people at the top. We can value leadership and accountability within our spheres of influence and we can ask our bosses to do their part, as well. If we don't get the results we want the first time, we can try again. After all, we're in the business of influencing people.

I leave the department with enormous respect and affection for all my colleagues, but especially my career colleagues. I have seen you put yourselves and your families in difficult and often dangerous places. I have watched you rescue colleagues from

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the rubble of bombed embassies, and confront natural and man-made disasters that would make contestants in television survival shows run away. And I can attest to the integrity of

your work products and the conviction with which you have stood by them in the face of pressure in Washington.

You make a difference. You deserve good leadership. And so do the people who work for you. ■

Prudence Bushnell, a Foreign Service officer from 1981 to 2005, served as ambassador to Kenya and Guatemala, principal deputy assistant secretary of State for African affairs, and dean of the Foreign Service Institute's Leadership and Management School, among many other assignments. Before joining the Foreign Service, Ambassador Bushnell enjoyed a successful career in the field of management and leadership training.

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