

The Value of Public Service

By Randall Reid

County Manager

Alachua County Florida

We find ourselves today as public sector leaders working in an era of dynamic global economics, stormy political discourse and facing yet another crisis in confidence in our public institutions. Memories of 9-11 sacrifices of public servants have faded as we debate the causes of our national afflictions, diminished financial security and face the current rhetoric frequently condemning the public sector. That said, I continue to feel an undiminished pride in working as a professional in local government. I know my jurisdiction, like the ones many of you work for, have a brighter economic future and are kinder and gentler places because of the personal investment and labor of public employees. My jurisdiction, perhaps like yours, is blessed with innovative, dedicated and creative public employees and our community is recognized by the innovation in our programs and excellence of our public academic and healthcare institutions. Thanks to the actions of our citizens thru public programs, the natural beauty of our countryside remains intact and protected and our economy is rebounding. The collaboration and work of many people makes these community achievements possible: people in both the private and public sectors. It is folly to think that only the private sector strives for obtainment of excellence or causes our communities to achieve it. The role of public employees and the value of public service is vital to our republic and the success of our communities.

Public sector employees are not the “non producers” of the currently popular Ayn Rand’s “Atlas Shrugged” worldview. The public sector serves a three-fold vital role as the provider of public goods, guardians of the commons and promoters a civic life essential to our communities. Private sector organizations while effective community partners, can be trusted to desire to do so only to the extent they can commercialize it for profit or create positive branding through their actions.

Early in my career as a manager I was influenced by a book, “Reinventing Government,” not with just the examples of change oriented, transformational management I had learned under my first boss and coauthor, Ted Gaebler, but most of all by five principles outlined in the preface of the book. This book, critical of government bureaucracies, stated that first, as practitioners, we must strive to preserve in this era our fundamental belief in democratic government. Secondly, we must believe that a civilized society cannot function effectively without “effective” government and we make that effectiveness a reality each day to the degree we can attain it. Thirdly, we must believe that those dedicated employees around us working in government are not the problem as much as the bureaucratic systems in which we are to this day forced to work in that are the principle problem with government. Fourthly, we must believe that neither traditional liberalism nor conservatism has much relevance to the problems that our governments face today and there exists a need for pragmatic and non ideological solutions.

Finally we must commit to provide equal opportunity for all of our citizens to prosper and reach their potential. These thoughts continue to serve me now in this time of public criticism of local government and continue to motivate me through periods of frustration in my public service.

Response to public sector critics must be viewed as a teachable moment and a time for civic education. In our comments and speeches, we need to recognize with humility our organizational shortcomings and explain those essential inefficiencies within public processes that represent the conflicting yet important values we adhere to as a democracy. Most importantly we must boldly and unabashedly defend the public sector's role in defending the "commons" and the competency and value of those individuals employed or called to public service. I suggest that public employees, whether as a Commissioner sitting at the dais or a member of a road construction crew, devote their lives to making local places better places for all our citizens. They are not nameless, faceless bureaucrats living in faraway places. They are your neighbors, and your friends. They sit next to you in your place of worship. They have families. They pay taxes. They are the customers in your businesses and the volunteers in your favorite organizations. They are fellow citizens of our community and it is their honor and passion to serve you. They do not grow rich in doing so, as a narrowing minority continues to do in the private sector, but they serve you well and deserve your respect.

In my experience, our public sector peers start off each morning with a totally different set of fundamental questions in their minds than our private sector counterparts in community life, who must measure their profit margins and commercial viability. Many of our public employees start every day with the well-being of the entire community in mind and specific issues essential to community prosperity and health they must grapple. Sometimes these seem like Don Quixote assaults on society's broken institutions. They ask important questions and develop strategies to solve increasingly complex community problems. Questions considered by the private sector are tangential or seek a nexus to community problems only if they can commercialize the opportunity, profit off the commons or assist their corporate branding by association to community building efforts. Corporate loyalty to a specific place is a dying value in today's global or absentee businesses ownership.

Public employees ask humane questions such as if anyone is going hungry today? Are citizens in danger because of temperature extremes? How can we help keep citizens healthy? Is someone in despair because of illness but unable to afford treatment? Is a veteran feeling lost and isolated? Does a victim of violent crime need assistance? Can a non-profit organization help tend to those in need? Did a person's race prevent them from renting a home? How can we assist parents prevent childhood obesity?

Public employees plan for a better future for their communities. They plan for the benefits of their citizens and preservation of historical places while balancing the impact of new development. We ask what our communities will look like in fifty years. Are we building safe structures? Can we grow in a way that creates a sustainable future? What will transportation look like as gasoline costs increase? Can we use energy more wisely? Will there be farms here in the future or only houses? How can we work to grow local businesses?

Public employees ask if precious natural systems and our environment that undergirds our communities are safe. Are our water supplies and air quality healthy? Are we safe from exposure to dangerous toxins? How do we dispose of dangerous chemicals? Will future generations have access to our beautiful wild spaces? Are we protecting our wetlands? Will we have adequate water? Are habitats for wildlife diversity maintained for future years?

Public employees ask questions out of concern for our citizen's quality of life and public safety. This quality of life focus is a clear responsibility of the public realm and makes for sustainable and resilient businesses and neighborhoods. How can we improve our transportation infrastructure? How can we pay for a park or fire station? How can we encourage business retention? Can we recycle more and limit non renewable resource use? How do we best respond to the devastation of a fire, a hurricane, a medical emergency? How do we make our neighborhoods safe? Are there safe alternatives to jail and long term incarceration?

Public employees ask if we have responsibly enhanced our democratic ideals and sufficiently gathered citizen concerns on important issues. Have we made our government more accessible to all people? Have we responded to citizen questions in a helpful and timely way? Are we providing civic education opportunities and forums for civic conversations, as well as formal public hearings and processes? Do we properly engage citizens in problem solving or have we made them only consumers of our services?

As ethical public managers and employees we need to listen to our critics closely and respectfully as citizens and concentrate on fiscal accountability, effective governance and outstanding performance at each of our public tasks and responsibilities. We must, however, never dismiss the fact that what we do as public employees is essential to the functioning of our communities and the welfare of our citizenry. If we work hard, treat our elected officials, peers and our citizens with respect and civility, we can answer any question and respond to any challenge our communities face. We can bring honor back to public service and attract a new generation to public service.