

THE UNITED STATES' EXECUTIVE CIVIL SERVANTS' TRAINING SYSTEM

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 with it its own cadre of loyal workers. The government survived these transitions of power only because each new administration recognized the value of experience and consequently practiced some degree of moderation as it came into office, replacing many but not all of the civil servants from the previous administration. That all 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 critiques became concerned. The "spoils system" was based on a quotation, "to the victor go the spoils" and was basically a situation in which personal interests superseded concern for the nation. Greed and corruption were the result.

In response, certain politicians argued for a civil service corps that was above greed and corruption; one that was even above the competitive nature of politics. They envisioned a civil servants corps with a professional ethic and values structure that would ensure that public service remained these servants' first and greatest concern. Through a series of laws, beginning with the Pendleton Act of 1883, they created a civil service that was not appointed but was instead hired and promoted based on merit; one that was not subject to political pressures but functioned for the public good. It was a service corps built around values that emphasized public service over individual or party gain.

Although the US Civil Service still adheres to the service-before-self values envisioned by its founders, it has changed since its founding. The public pressure that drove the implementation of competency examinations in 1883 was countered by advocacy groups that later eliminated those examinations. Other rights and privileges for civil servants have been captured in statutes. The right to join unions, protection from discrimination and even a provision for military-like honors for career civil servants upon their deaths have all been written into law. One of the most striking modifications to the Civil Service system occurred in 1978 when the US Congress passed the Civil Service Reform Act that created the Senior Executive Service. This Service consists of a group of very senior, very talented executive leaders who can move across government agencies to solve problems and ensure that the interests of individual agencies remain subordinate to the greater public good.

Today's developmental approach

With this brief background in the US Civil Service system, let us shift our attention to the manner in which the US develops its public servants. That development starts 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 is not an oath to a piece of paper. As noted previously, the US Civil Service system is not addressed in the Constitution directly. It is instead an oath to the principles and ideals embedded within the Constitution and the governmental framework it describes. The oath marks an important subordination of individuality to the nation in the life of the civil servant and is the first step that the new civil servant takes in adopting the national values that are so clearly evident in the Constitution.

Beyond this common starting point, however, civil servant development is decidedly individualistic at the start of one's career. Each job within the Service has a job description, outlining general duties to be performed. Within each job, however, the civil servant and supervisor contract for specific performance by jointly deciding on "performance elements." These elements are specific areas in which the civil servant's performance is assessed and evaluated. The elements are detailed in terms of quality and quantity so that workers know exactly what is expected of them.

Similarly, each civil servant creates an "individual development plan" that outlines the developmental initiatives – to include education, training and experiential activities – that the civil servant will pursue during the coming year to enhance his or her 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 be a factor in a performance appraisal. Failure to complete required training, for instance, could contribute to an employee being assessed as a poor performer.

In essence, there are three types of training within the United States civil-service system:

1. There is training that is job-specific – what is typically referred to as “technical training”;
2. There is training that is common to federal service anywhere – what some call “recurring training” – that addresses topics such as diversity, computer security, ethics, etc;
3. And there is training that is specific to leadership growth.

Of these three types, only recurring training is required by all civil servants. In the United States, recurring training is either a periodic or a positional requirement. In terms of periodic training, agencies post a training requirement and a due date and all of their employees must complete the required training by that due date. For positional requirements, training requirements are posted specific to a given job or set of responsibilities. For instance, prior to becoming a supervisor in the Office of Personnel Management, a candidate has to complete four, online training courses. These cover:

- An overview of personnel management
- Measuring performance
- Assessing and addressing poor performance
- And mentoring fundamentals

Except for such training requirements; however, the majority of training that a civil servant receives is addressed through the individual training plans described previously.

To aid supervisors in creating individual training plans specific to technical training, government agencies routinely offer “career paths” – guidance on specific training opportunities that are available and schedules to help in deciding when in an individual's career the training would prove most valuable. Individual employees can demonstrate initiative by accelerating personal, technical development or can instead decide not to pursue all available opportunities and remain at a lower level of expertise reflects the individuality mindset.

To facilitate leadership development for progressively higher levels of responsibility, the Office of Personnel Development – the regulatory bureau for personnel policy within the United States government – worked with agencies from across the government to discern 28 “competencies” vital to success as a leader. These competencies – specific skill sets desired or required for success as Federal leaders – help guide supervisors in selecting developmental opportunities for their employees. These competencies are aligned along five Executive Core Qualifications, the five 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 workers and their supervisors can select opportunities specific to individual employee 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		

Fundamental Competencies		
Interpersonal Skills	Oral Communication	Integrity/Honesty
Continual Learning	Written Communication	Public-Service

Although it is a long list, those who wish to pursue advancement within the civil-service system must endeavor to master all of these leadership competencies. To do so, they invest 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 these three developmental approaches is not academic but is important to building and delivering developmental opportunities that 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 their computers from malicious software or computer attacks. Workers are trained to fill out forms or use their equipment properly.

In addition to training, however, there is also a need for education. Education 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 and leverage innovation and creativity in order to solve problems.

Education also helps inculcate values. One does not develop an ethos that abhors dishonesty and corruption through rote memorization and fill-in-the-blank testing. Neither does one develop an appreciation for ecological responsibility through workbooks and media files. Values are inculcated through education and mentoring, and preferably through interactive, experiential learning. Training alone will not produce workers who can achieve desired levels of innovation. Education and experience must be integrated into developmental solutions to produce such workers.

Experience provides opportunities to apply what has been learned through training and / or education. Supervisors can leverage experience for learning by placing employees into different areas within their area of expertise – often called “broadening” – or by moving them to positions of greater trust or responsibility. The orchestration of experience into an employee’s development can substantially increase the benefits of training or education and is a key consideration in civil servants’ career paths.

In very simple terms, training prepares people 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.

Of course, civil servants also need experience. No amount of training or education can prepare civil servants 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 endeavors takes practice. Through experience, supervisors can assess the effectiveness of governmental training or education even as civil servants get opportunities to reinforce their learning through application.

The United States Civil Service leverages 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, require education as well. Discussions on creativity, customer service, team-building and negotiating clearly require in-depth forays into the affective domain of learning; the domain most in the purview of education. Yet there are constraints on education. It requires a tremendous resource investment – an investment of time, money and materials.

To meet the developmental needs of its Civil Service system with an eye toward resources, the United States government offers developmental opportunities through a variety of methodologies. There are individual, computer-based classes available through e-Learning sites; resident and blended-learning courses, offered through organizations like the Office of Personnel Management’s Center for Leadership Development; and opportunities for courses with private-sector providers and public institutions of learning.

Of course, the government also sets 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 the various Amendments that have been 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 programs described above. The result is a singularly committed yet heterogeneous Civil Service: professionals who recognize and leverage diverse skills, talents, education, training and experience for the good of the Government as a whole. There are experts and novices, specialists and generalists, employees who specialize in customer service while other employees within the same office specialize in administrative or managerial processes. They are unique individuals who work as one, focused team in support of a common purpose and common values. This approach has proven highly effective; however, there is always room for growth and improvement. Technological innovations, the ability to engage with one another almost anytime and anyplace... these opportunities are changing the way in which governments can train and educate employees and must be leveraged responsibly to enhance commitment and increase effectiveness in the interest of improved public service.

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

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 governments and, more importantly, to the people of our individual nations. In most instances, we work for less money than our private-sector counterparts, do not enjoy the same level of prestige or privilege and yet our service is foundational to 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 together to resolve the social problems they face – link us in ways that make us something of 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 requires us to be willing and open to sharing both successes and – although frightening at times – our failures.

The 2013 Astana Economic Forum and World Anti-Crisis Conference are excellent steps in the right direction. So is the United Nations Development Program's Regional Hub for Civil Service to be headquartered in Astana. Kazakhstan is making important steps toward an international consortium of civil servants dedicated to excellence in the public sector. It is up to all of us to continue contributing to this important effort. Together we can share the lessons we have learned and enhance the quality of service to our people. This too shall 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.