

The Senior Executive Institute: Lessons in the Spirit of Thomas Jefferson **By Joseph S. Portugal, Certified Manager; and Robert E. Matson, Ed.D.**

Today's local government manager is constantly beset with issues of greater complexity than ever before. For this reason, ICMA encourages city managers to seek opportunities for ongoing professional development. From the annual conference, regional training, state municipal league, and other programs, continuing education is clearly first and foremost on the mind of the profession if not the professional.

The search for a program that adheres to the list of ICMA Management Practices offers many possibilities. With the advent of the ICMA Credentialing Program, it is incumbent upon managers who attain the certification to make the annual commitment of 40 hours of professional development more than just a tedious chore.

That mandate separates professionals in local government from other professions since the dynamics of city management continue to change at a rapid pace. Among the contributors are the pangs of technology, the call for businesslike efficiency at the exclusion of effectiveness, and the demand for accountability at the expense of citizenship.

The moment one exits the classroom and enters the local political arena, the demands and burden of management increase exponentially. Faced with this crescendo of expectations, what are managers to do? Perhaps one approach is to seek opportunities to learn, retool, and in some cases, rethink their approach to the profession. The Senior Executive Institute (SEI) at the University of Virginia offers such an opportunity.

The Setting

Nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains is the Virginia campus at Charlottesville. It is home to the legacy of Thomas Jefferson and the center for learning that he envisioned. In the Jeffersonian tradition, participants from across the United States come to SEI for sessions at the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service.

One doesn't visit "*Mr. Jefferson's University*" without experiencing the simple virtues of its surroundings and the ambience of its halls and grounds. Statuesque in appearance, it provides an ideal learning environment and a practical laboratory where management professionals can hone their skills.

Acceptance of the "calling" of the profession creates a spiritual roadmap to examine the commitment to servant leadership. Professional excellence, ethical service, and effective local governance are cornerstones for public management. At SEI, attendees come face to face with their own professional mortality and the quest to cement their personal legacy in a program that extols the virtues of democracy.

The HPO Model

Wouldn't all managers welcome a systematic method for revitalizing their work culture? A

developmental model called “The High Performance Organization of the 21st Century” was developed by the SEI faculty and is now a big part of the why, how, and who of the work leadership in local governments across our nation, in Canada, and around the world.

This model for the work of leadership begins with a leadership philosophy that becomes the core of your work force development and productivity. The next cornerstone is your desired future—the vision, collectively owned and daily used as a guide. Then add the behavioral and operating values that need to flow in the arteries of the daily activities, and now you have laid the groundwork for answering a list of tough questions that allow you to sharpen the production to outcome strategy, structure, and systems.

Invariably, the managers who attend SEI have much experience and success in moving their work culture from its early 20th century roots to the best prescription for the 21st century version. Consequently, they are very aware of what needs to change and have usually made progress. What the HPO model offers is a disciplined thought process that leads to a broadly owned picture of that future we are trying to create. It offers the best means of making clear the measures of success needed to make steady progress toward that future with complimentary means and measures that will bring the right work culture in league with the right people, thus shortening the path to success.

In summary, the managers and colleagues provide the answers to their local government. The HPO model provides the questions, which is always leadership’s most critical role.

The Program

SEI challenges the participant to grow professionally, personally, and interpersonally. It schools attendees to understand that the forces impacting local government can be catalysts for creating a new style of organization. This new order is steeped in basic democratic values and guided by a collective vision of community-building and empowerment.

The ICMA-SEI Program lasts eight days, while the summer program spans two weeks. In both cases, the exploration of democratic themes, team exercises, feedback from peers, and personal introspective sessions help each individual sharpen skills and test strategies that create high performance organizations. Graduates of the program are equipped with the necessary tools to craft a healthy, flexible government that interacts effectively and collaboratively with citizens.

Another key facet of the program is that it is designed specifically for local government managers. SEI counts among its faculty senior local government managers who have experienced the challenges of which they speak. This provides practical insight into the problems of the day, and it is a true post-graduate experience dedicated to the highest ideals and tenets of the management profession.

Participants explore leadership from both organizational and personal perspectives and examine the culture and structure of the council/manager form of government. The ensuing discussion among instructors and attendees creates lively and provocative discourse that challenges

entrenched bureaucratic structures and organizational systems in search of a proactive, visionary approach to local governance.

The Experience

As a city manager, I am committed to honesty and ethics in service to others. After attaining the Credentialed Manager certification, I came to Charlottesville seeking my first senior level post-graduate training in almost 20 years. I previously attended an executive program in Texas in the early 90s.

Entering the classroom on the first day, I felt a sense of anticipation about this new experience. Scanning the room, I noticed the following in plain view for all to see:

“On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment or exam.”

Darden Business School’s first class, the “Class of ’57,” had donated this plaque, and it prompted me to reflect on the ICMA Code of Ethics and the values we pledge to uphold. More than anything else, it caused me to evaluate the things that matter to me professionally and the legacy I wanted to create as I approached the twilight of my career.

In the ensuing days, I felt the need to delve deeper into the decision to accept the “calling” to be a public servant. This was amplified on the second day during the individual preparation of a “life road map.” The purpose of the exercise is to examine key experiences in your life that have molded and shaped your professional identity. Encouraging every person to focus on the values that shape their leadership style is the first step in understanding the convergence of public service and democracy.

That evening, I realized that I had come face to face with thoughts about my future, and my “calling” was reaffirmed. The depth of that self-examination led to a spiritual awakening about my personal and professional life. As local government professionals, we talk all around the role that faith plays in our service to the communities in which we live and work. There are plausible reasons for the range of issues that we face and the methods we use to resolve them on a daily basis. Yet those guided by providence understand the relationship between the burden of leadership and the need to manage accordingly.

Reflecting on my stay in Charlottesville, the experience left me with a greater sense of purpose and a profound understanding of what I needed to do to become a more effective city manager. The opportunity to be among like-minded professionals, to share in a relaxed yet purposeful atmosphere, and to absorb knowledge and understanding that lends itself to a critical assessment of one’s skills and abilities creates the perfect balance of learning and practical experience.

Citizenship and democracy are necessary bedfellows, and a nation that professes allegiance to the core values associated with both is what makes us a unique people. SEI helps the individual participant become reacquainted with those values, and the inspiration that one draws from that exposure is a reminder that local government is an area where we can make a difference. The

knowledge that we can create high performance organizations through the empowerment of staff and citizens at the local level helps redefine public service in the interest of furthering democracy.

Conclusion

To be sure, SEI is quietly leading the management profession toward a greater understanding of practical affairs and public service in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson. Graduates of the program number more than 800 dating to 1986. Preference is given to city, town, and county managers, yet leadership responsibilities of all applicants are considered in the selection process. Additional information may be obtained by visiting the Web site at www.coopercenter.org/leadership/SEI.

Ultimately, attendees have the opportunity to mold and shape their management and leadership style in the interest of creating high performance organizations and achieving effective local governance. Perhaps this is no more evident than through the words expressed by Jefferson himself:

“ . . . as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered, and manners and opinions change, with the circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.”

The next generation of local government leaders can benefit from this sage advice and the experience that SEI affords.

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