

## Briefly Noted

Random ideas about public administration, leadership and management to consider from Andrew Graham

January, 2017

### A Hippocratic Oath for Public Servants

Public service is a proud career. It is also complex, demanding and so varied that we often lose sight of the reasons we got involved and want to stay involved. We see this in so many ways today. Those in the higher echelons lose sight of the people they service or, become cynical and seek comfort in a bubble of pseudo reality. Those at the front end often get lost in the day-to-day or, even worse, become overwhelmed by their work and its demands, losing sight of the purpose they service and then succumb to callous abuses of power or, still worse, PTSD. No one thing can prevent us from losing our path, especially in the rich and demanding world of public service. But, maybe, just maybe, having a signpost like the Hippocratic Oath might help. Maybe, just maybe, when you become a public servant – and I am mean any public servant anywhere in the public sector – you sight onto a set of values and commitments as our medical profession does. Does the Hippocratic Oath make a doctor a good practitioner? No, of course not. But it does ground her in her profession and does present to the world a set of commitments for which she has accepted accountability.

I have taken some liberties with both the 1946 version of the Hippocratic Oath and history to suggest this Oath for Public Servants. I have adapted the 1946 version to public service. I have also added the important concept of doing no harm, which did not appear in any versions of the Hippocratic Oath. But, it is just too important to leave out.

I welcome any reactions, revisions or objections to this idea. I have no power or authority to make it happen. I am, as the saying goes so readily these days, putting it out there.

### ***Oath for Public Servants***

*I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, my role as a public servant through this covenant:*

*I will respect the democratic institutions that I serve. I will rigorously provide both fearless advice and loyal execution of the decisions legally made by my political masters.*

*I will serve the public good by applying and obeying the law, the direction of my political masters in that context and using those authorities and responsibilities I have been given wisely and judiciously.*

*I will respect the hard-won gains of those public servants in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.*

*I will apply, for the public good, all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of excessive haste or needless delay. I will seek the path of presentation over reaction.*

*I will work for change and adaptation to meet the public's needs while sustaining those institutions, rights and practices that are the foundation of our public life. I will support both transformation and stability.*

*I will remember that there is art to public service as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh sterile analysis in the execution of the will of the government.*

*I will not be ashamed to say "I know not," nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed to achieve the public good.*

*I will respect the dignity and privacy of all citizens. I will be mindful at all times that I service the public good. In doing so, I must use whatever authorities and powers I am given with humility and an awareness of their impact on the people, heritage and environment of this world.*

*I will remember that the consequences of my actions may extend beyond their intentions, that I understand fully the risks that my actions may create and that, in the end, the good must prevail. Above all, my actions and those policies and procedures I practice should not do more harm.*

*I will remember that my role as a public servant makes me a servant of the society in which I live and prosper, that my ultimate loyalty is to that society and its democratic institutions. My role is a special one and I carry the weight of that responsibility at all times and in all I do.*

*Now I carry this oath with me in all I do as a public servant. I shall be guided by it in times of seeking the right path of advice, action or decision.. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of serving the public good. May I be respected for this now and hereafter.*