

Building a Successful Career in Government

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Comments by Professor Andrew Graham, Queens University

Time is short and so many stories to tell. So, let's get going.

Quick Context Setting

- Career in government that spanned pretty well every kind of job I wanted to do
- Long time as an ADM, also President of APEX, gave me a good perspective on the career public servant
- Transited to Queens via Conference Board of Canada as a planned move to Career 2
- Perspective: still love public service, living in a country that affirms what we do, still a kid with a dream

Key Messages

- A career thinking forward and a career thinking retrospectively are quite different things: I see a happy, in my case, confluence of intent and serendipity with a couple of bad spells along the way.
- It is important not to buy into a poorly thought notion of what a career is and what success is. I have seen so many examples of very fulfilled people with great careers at an officer level, where they are content, well paid, with ample time to pursue other more defining elements of their lives. Did they have a career – sure did. I have also seen DMs and ADMs (too many in my work at APEX) whom I can only describe as restless strivers, but it was never clear for what.
- There is no such thing as luck: there is preparation and opportunity
- I have no use for career planning per se: it has to be in the context of work, other life goals and your own take on success. Today you have only a limited appreciation of the kind of work you will want to be doing in 15 years. In fact, the job you will have then probably does not exist or will change so dramatically that would not recognize it.
- You have talents, aspirations and inclinations that you are not aware of yet. They will adapt and grow. One of the keys in a career is finding work that pushes you. But to be accomplished in a career you have to really be ready to take a gulp and accept a real challenge.
- Most of the parameters of your career will take change, sometimes quickly: who ever thought I would be a Warden of Kingston Penitentiary at 34? Well, you know, the sad reality is that my boss died. Now, was I on a developmental track of some kind. Yes. Did I have a boss (not the one that died) who was ready to take a chance? Yes. Preparation and opportunity. Be prepared to take a leap.

- Key to a successful career is doing your job well and earning a reputation for good work. The term 'careerist' is one that you do not want to have put on you. There is a well-documented phenomenon that governments see all over the world. People coming into a job they do not understand, stay for a short term, manage their upwards relations really well, and leave before they either screw things up or avoid being accountable for their own mistakes.
- Solid work is built on a preparedness to really understand the field in which you are working and go the extra kilometer to produce.
- Work-life balance is a fraud. At best, you get a continuously evolved work-life fit or misfit. However, too many people let their careers or work take precedence. That's just fine as long as you are clear headed about it. What do I mean by that? Well, if you are in a phase of your career that is really demanding and you are deep into a very focused time, then your work-life fit needs to adjust to that. You need your family with you. You need your health. You need your perspective. If you want it that much, manage it. On the other hand, not wanting to move up the ladder is just fine. Do not define a career as a succession of ever more senior jobs. I have also seen some of my former E.As (the majority of whom, I am proud to say, went on to serious and important positions) seek my advice about taking on a supervisory job. The pay spread was not great and they were already well paid. In one case, two young kids whom he loved dearly. His wife was on a real career trajectory. He was really happy in his role and saw several years of really good work. His question: "Will it hurt me if I turn down this director job?" My answer was a question: "Define hurt." He struck a cord for me because even though I was an ADM for 14 years, I was the one who cooked dinner at home. I left the office at 5 (Now, truth be told, I was in a 0700). It took a lot of work to have the lifestyle we had evolved. It also meant that, when I was asked about a senior post at PCO, I turned it down. That effectively cut off my path to a DM job and I was fine with that. Luckily the Clerk of the day understood completely. We remain friends to this day.
- Network, yes, but in a value added way. I was and remain a serial networker. What I mean by that is that I delight in learning from public servants and academic colleagues. I also delight in connecting people who have some mutual need or interest. I feel that the work world in government today talks a good line on collaboration and team work, but isolates people through travel and conference restrictions that means they do not have the opportunities to network and learn from others.
- Know when to hold them and when to fold them. There will be bad spots in your career. Wrong fit. Wrong boss. Shifting parameters. Get ready for things like being hired by the boss of your dreams and finding out the week you arrive that she is leaving and the new guy turns out to be careerist sociopath. That is when you have to be ready to fire your boss. How do you do that? You leave. Just move on. I did it twice in my career and managed, somehow, to emerge better off in both instances.
- Work hard, Do good work. Be ready.