The following was an oral presentation made at the Centre for Studies in Leadership 2007 Conference on “Public Sector Leadership in the 21st Century” held at the University of Guelph from May 4th to May 5th, 2007. Denise Amyot, Vice-President of The Leadership Network, Public Service Human Resource Management Agency of Canada, presented along with Kim Bellissimo, Director of Executive Programs and Services for the Centre for Leadership and Learning, Government of Ontario and Pamela Bryant, Fellow and Senior Advisor, School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Toronto as part of a panel on “Public Sector Leadership Challenges in the 21st Century.”

Editor’s Note: This transcript was edited for readability purposes.

The first thing I want to tell you is that I’m a passionate public servant. I’ve been a public servant for about 21 years. I have had the chance to work in seven to eight departments so far. I still have about fifteen to work in. And I have to say that I really love my job. I’m quite lucky because right now I’m responsible for leadership in the Government of Canada. So I think I have the best job in government.

In my presentation, I will refer to the Clerk. In government, the Clerk means the “Clerk of the Privy Council.” It means basically the CEO of the Public Service. Kevin Lynch is the current Head of the Public Service, and essentially the CEO of the Government.

Now you are probably wondering, “what does she think about leadership?” This morning, I will talk about different things with respect to leadership today. I will first talk about the government, then the trends in leadership, about what a leader looks like in the 21st century, and finally, what do we have to offer? Where are we going in government with respect to leadership? And what impact and influence does our Clerk have on leadership in the Public Service? (Our Clerk has not been in his position for a long time but he is already making a big impact on leadership in the Public Service).

Maria [Maria Barrados, President of the Public Service Commission of Canada] has already told you the size of our organization. She has also told you that we are the largest employer with the most national, international, and multi-skilled employee base. This does not mean that we have more competencies, but you can literally find all professions in the Government of Canada. Additionally, what is interesting to deal with in the government (and which Ms. Barrados already mentioned to you) is accountability and transparency. Both of us are mentioning these because they are influencing whatever we do in government. You would not be surprised to hear that Canadians trust in public institutions is decreasing. This is a phenomenon that is, in fact, happening across the world in all public institutions. So, in government we are trying, as much as possible, to be more transparent and to ensure accountability so that Canadians see value for their money.
So, what does transparency and accountability mean with respect to leadership? It does create challenges but also opportunities from a leadership perspective. The Clerk launched something recently that he is calling the “Public Service Renewal.” Some of you might question the use of the word “renewal” and ask, “what renewal?” “How come everyone is renewing something?” You all know, because of the kind of job you have, that if we don’t renew ourselves, we become stale. We don’t progress, and we become like dinosaurs. What the Public Service Renewal for Government means is that it directs how we work to maintain a creative institution which is central to the development of our country. It also ensures that we develop and nurture leadership. Ultimately, it means that we’re going to have a results-oriented management approach so that we don’t just “do things to do things,” but that we measure how we are doing. The example that I always give with respect to that is measuring learning. Often, when you want to measure learning, you say “how many of your employers have taken courses?” Sorry, but that doesn’t answer the question, “have they learned something or not?” It is really about whether your employee can learn in your own organization. Measuring this would be a much better indicator of your organization’s success.

For us, Public Service Renewal means that we need to be strategic to ensure that we fill the gaps. We may be the largest employer in Canada but we are also aging. In the 1960s, the majority of public servants were under 45 years of age. Now, it is the opposite. The majority of public servants are older than 45 and this creates a big challenge. The average age of an individual entering the public service is 36 years old (for an indeterminate employee. I want to specify that because we also have a number of casual employees and term people). The average age of an executive coming into the Public Service (Exec One level) is 49 and 50 (Exec Two level). What impact do you think this has when we talk about a relevé [renewal]? It means that your feeder group is only one year younger. This shows to you the challenge we then have from a leadership perspective because, as you know, leadership is at all levels. You therefore need to ensure that you will have people who will be able to take those key jobs but, if they are all the same age, it will create an issue. So how do you develop people in an accelerated way? That is an issue I will address today.

We also have a changing workforce. It’s very competitive. People look for their boss. It used to be the other way around. The employer was looking for the employees. Now, more and more, it is the employee that chooses his or her boss. Who do they want to work for? What kind of values does he or she possess? So leadership is not the same anymore. Today, as a leader, you need to ensure that you motivate your people and that your people feel as if they are growing. If not, guess what? They have a choice. Twenty years ago there was not that much choice.

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what you have; you need to have meaning. This issue therefore presents big challenges.

Another thing that is very interesting with respect to leadership is that skills that were good and important before are changing. It is a very, very complex environment within the government. You can think of it like the Greek Goddess Hecate that has many heads. Individuals must be able to deal with many aspects at the same time. The private sector is probably becoming like that. The environment also forces you to be able to network easily as it is everything now. If you talk to Generation Y, they know how to network. I was recently reading about the way that some organizations in the private sector recruit their people. They first do interviews on the phone because they want to see how people can connect without seeing each other. That’s how they decide if they will go through an interview. They don’t check the competencies during that time but to see if they are able to establish a rapport with the people at the other end of the line. This is a very new skill; it is not something that we had to face. But, nowadays people work all over the world, and often their colleagues reside in different places. Colleagues might never meet in 10 or 20 years, so how might he or she establish a rapport? The climate then makes these new skills important.

So what does this all mean for government? Our Clerk – and I will read it to you – said something that for us was very important. In his first few days, he gave us three words and kept repeating them. Today, after almost a year having been in the job, he still repeats the same three words: leadership, teamwork and excellence in whatever presentation he does. One of the things he stated with respect to leadership was that “leadership is not about working longer hours, working harder, or taking on more responsibility. It is about engaging employ-
going well or not going well.

A very significant point in government is to promote what I call “sustainable leadership,” that is leadership which you sustain. For me, that is really about developing leaders that are willing to grow leaders. Very often people stop when they see themselves possessing “really good leaders.” But, as an institution, what are you doing to grow leaders? How do you ensure that you are developing leaders that set out to grow leaders? Do you check on what’s being done? This is something that I think will be asked more and more in all public institutions or even in private ones.

So, what do we do in government to ensure that we build leadership? We’ve created the “Public Service Advantage” to ensure that we are ready to build a leadership culture. The first part of the advantage I will talk about is leadership competencies. We have four leadership competencies that are important for all Managers and Supervisors. Now I’m sure that some of you are saying “she just said leadership was at all levels yet now she’s talking about leadership competencies for Managers, Supervisors and Director Generals.” Well, we have not yet developed the leadership competencies for the other levels, but they are in preparation by my group. The competencies will be the same at all levels, but we will explain them differently. The four competencies are very easy. We used to have over 15 and 17 at one point but nobody could ever remember them. So, now they are:

- values and ethics,
- engagement,
- strategic thinking, and
- management excellence.

We want people that think with their head, not with their feet, and who focus on management excellence because that is key. People from other countries are really interested in the way we have organized the “Advantage.” We have listed the competencies according to the behaviours that should be shown. For instance, if you are a Director General, what should the behaviour be with respect to strategic thinking? Well, it is written what it should be. What if you are a Supervisor or a Manager? What if you are an Assistant Deputy Minister or a Deputy Minister? It is all written down so people know what to expect. But, the most interesting thing, the second part of the document, is the ineffective behaviours. It is written in black and white. So, if an employee sees behaviour that they don’t think is right, they too can look at the “Advantage.” In some cases, you can look at this document and even associate names to behaviours. You read a competency and say, “oh my God, I know X is a bit like that.” The document therefore is important because it makes clear what is expected of people. This is a very powerful tool right now for recruiting people. Whatever screening we do for a competition or development program, we check with those competencies outlined in the “Advantage.”

The second part to building leadership in the government is with respect to performance management. In government, if you’re an Executive, you don’t receive your full salary. You receive only a portion of your salary. The rest of your salary is at risk, and depends upon if you meet or don’t meet your expectations. It is now well known that an individual may receive the rest of his or her salary, a portion of the remainder of his or her salary, or a bonus when he or she is assessed. The average of those who receive a bonus is only 23%. So not all are awarded a bonus and not all receive their full salary because we want to emphasize that performance is important.

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Key Leadership Competencies Model

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We will also be introducing (and I mention it here because I think it’s important if you’re interested in leadership) a new component that will be linked to people management. It’s not only important what you do but how you do it. It’s already understood that you’re supposed to look at the what and the how, but what we will be doing is to attach a monetary value to show the importance of the how. This will probably be quite revolutionary. There is a department that is a separate agency that is currently using this component, and it has been quite successful in their department thus far.

A third aspect to building leadership in the government are development programs. We have a number of development programs from entry level up to Assistant Deputy Ministers. They vary, but most of them have assignments attached to it so that people are able to stretch themselves in a new environment but with what I call a “safety net.” Participants in the program all have support mechanisms - whether it’s a coach, mentor, or action learning group - where they can talk openly and freely with people facing similar situations.

The last thing that I would like to mention today is the impact of our Clerk. He has been incredible in the way he has pushed us with respect to leadership. There is a Prime Minister’s Advisory Committee that talks to and gives advice to the Public Service, and one of the key aspects they have mentioned is that we should increase our leadership programs so that we’re ready to face the big demographic change. I invite you to read the Clerk’s report because it will give you an idea of what the government is up to from a public service perspective. You will also notice how many times the word “leadership” appears in the document. You will be both amazed and surprised. Normally, these reports are to talk about what happened last year, but, for the first time, we have a report that is talking about where the public service is going and where it should go. Right now, the Clerk himself is doing a tour with the Deputy Clerk to meet thousands of employees to share what is the Public Service renewal and what is expected of them. I say this to convey how important the CEO or the Chief of an organization is in making sure people understand the expectations so that we all know what is to be expected.

References


Speaker:

Denise Amyot: Ms. Denise Amyot was appointed Vice-President of The Leadership Network on January 3, 2007. She has also held positions as Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Affairs and Ministerial Services Branch, Human Resources and Social Development Canada; Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Management and Public Affairs, Social Development Canada; and Director General of Communications at Natural Resources Canada.

She has led teams in human resources, policy, operations, service delivery and public education. Her experience in social, economic, and cultural areas includes issues such as multiculturalism, Aboriginal affairs, official languages, education, disability, voluntary sector and labour market.

In October 2007, The Leadership Network adopted a new name: the Leadership and Talent Management Sector, or LTM. This change in name represents the organization’s increased focus on talent management as an integral part of leadership development within the Public Service. LTM remains committed to building the network of leaders at all levels of the Public Service and to helping them develop their leadership skills.