

Revitalizing Public Service: Insights from Max Stier President and CEO, Partnership for Public Service

Today the country faces challenges of unprecedented complexity, from guiding an economy through crisis to expanding healthcare coverage. To meet these and a myriad of other challenges will require transforming the way government works while also inspiring the best and brightest to choose public service.

Building, energizing, and maintaining a high-quality workforce is the key to success for any organization and the federal government is no exception. How does the Partnership for Public Service seek to inspire a new generation to serve? What is the Partnership for Public Service doing to transform the way government works? And what are some of the key human capital and workforce challenges facing the federal government? We will explore these questions and so much more with our very special guest Max Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service. The following provides an edited excerpt from our interview.

Max, before we delve into specific initiatives, perhaps you could give us an overview of the history and evolving mission of the Partnership for Public Service. What prompted its creation and how has it evolved since its inception?

— Max Stier —

Sam Heyman founded the Partnership for Public Service in September 2001 to address the need for reform in government service. In 1963, Sam was a newly minted Harvard law graduate and did what about a third of his class did at that time, which was go into the government. He met Bobby Kennedy two or three times in his first year at the Department of Justice. It was an experience that stayed with him throughout his professional life. He stayed five years and took what he thought would just be a leave of absence to wind up the family business when his dad died. Instead, he wound up becoming an even more successful businessman than his father. Fast-forward several decades, Sam learned from the then-dean of the Harvard Law School that they were no longer in a world in which a third of the top students



went into government. It was more like two or three percent of graduates going into government. This concerned Sam. He became very interested in why talent was no longer going into government in the same way it had when he graduated from law school. He ultimately concluded that he needed to put his oar in and start a nonprofit; that was the real genesis of the Partnership. Its mission is to think about how you attract the right talent into government. I put together a business plan. It focused on both the talent side—drawing the right talent into public service—but as important, helping government manage that talent effectively. These areas are the cornerstones of our mission.

Max, what kinds of work do you do to meet your stated mission? Would you tell us more about the Partnership's operational approach?



— Max Stier —

We have five areas of what we call our high-leverage points and they follow from what I described earlier in terms of our origins. First, we want to make sure the federal government has the right talent, so we promote government service through outreach to college campuses and job seekers. Secondly, we want to make sure that it has the right leadership managing that talent, which involves raising awareness and improving public attitudes about government service. Third, we want to provide hands-on assistance to federal agencies to improve their operations. Fourth, we advocate for needed legislation and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service. Fifth, we seek to generate thought-provoking research on, and effective responses to, the workforce challenges facing the federal government.

Max, building, energizing, and maintaining a high-quality workforce is key to the success of any organization and the federal government is no different. Would you highlight some of the critical workforce challenges facing the federal government today?

— Max Stier —

There are many challenges—[including] a workforce that is aging and retiring in very large numbers. The retirement numbers are up 24% from last year and we can anticipate this continuing to increase. There's been very little in the way of strategic planning in this area. There isn't a natural bench within the government that can replace those who are retiring. We don't have the talent pipeline that can also effectively replace the talent that's going away.

At the macro level, the demands on government are changing in very important ways. For example, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was designed to regulate a food market that was largely domestic, but is now in many significant ways global. This story has been played out all across the government where the basic mission needs of the government have changed and/or are going to change dramatically going forward and the talent models have not kept up. We compound that with budgetary pressures all agencies are under; squeezed, and more often than not, in ways that are not beneficial to overall performance. The performance piece gets lost in the effort to simply save the dollars and it's an evil brew.

Max, the last few years have been a pivotal time for the U.S. federal government. While interest in federal jobs and internships increased, the knowledge and understanding about government jobs and internships continued to lag. Would you tell us more about the Partnership's *Call to Serve* programs and resources? How has this program sought to establish a network that provides information on government employment, internship opportunities, and ways to navigate the cumbersome federal hiring system?

— Max Stier —

There's no doubt that in my view the talent is out there. As your question suggests, the talent doesn't know how to navigate the system nor is the system really designed to select the right people. Those are real issues. Now to this administration's credit, they have really focused on trying to fix the hiring process; they've made some real progress, but those in charge would admit that we're not there yet. There's a long way still to go.

The Partnership's *Call to Serve* programs and resources, developed in conjunction with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), are designed to tackle these pressing issues with a multifaceted approach. We have something on the order of 750 universities that are signed up for this effort. We're trying to share information about opportunities available in government, how you navigate that crazy system, what are the tricks of the trade, and we provide training to both university career services folks and faculty. In addition, we partner with more than 75 federal agencies to develop innovative recruiting methods and effective hiring techniques to improve government's capacity to build the workforce it needs.

We also have a neat program called the student ambassador program where we take folks that have interned at a federal agency and we train them on the HR information they need to know, so when they return to their campuses they actually become the recruiter-in-chief for their agencies. There is no more compelling or persuasive figure than a peer in trying to persuade folks that government service is a good next step for them. The other interesting opportunity is that those [student ambassador] interns come to government in very high numbers. There's a set of programming around this from our speakers bureau program where we get Feds to go to campuses, to the broader network, to the student ambassadors program, but we're trying to find smart ways to create connectivity to the government from the university campus.

On the policy side, we're pushing hard on things like changes to the hiring process. The changes we're seeing right now focus on time to hire. It is also important to understand who the right person should be for a given job. The student internship is a great way to actually access whether the talent is right for an organization. The federal government today converts about 7% of its interns into full-time employees. That number should be 50–60%.

Max, for over a decade I understand the Partnership has paid tribute to dedicated public servants, highlighting those who have made significant contributions to the country. Would you tell us about the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals, or Sammies? Perhaps you can elaborate on how honorees are chosen and what are some of the characteristics they all may share?

— Max Stier —

It's one of my favorite Partnership programs. If you want excellence in government, you have to recognize and reward it. You don't see enough of that in the public sector, so the Service to America medals (Sammies) has become the premier recognition program for innovative change agents in government. The Sammies have been awarded annually since 2002.

What's striking to me is that many participants are not even known within their own agency until they go through the Sammies process. There are videos of all of the winners available on our ServiceToAmericaMedals.org website. It's everyone from the [person] who started the Do Not Call

registry to the two FBI agents that solved the Birmingham bombing case 40 years after the fact to one of my favorites, Fraser Lockhart, who ran the program converting a former nuclear weapons lab into what is now a nature preserve. Lockhart and his team at the Department of Energy, working with contractors, local officials, and his federal colleagues, led the effort to successfully remediate Rocky Flats in just 10 years, at a cost of \$7 billion. In the end, perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the Rocky Flats cleanup project is that it shows what is possible with collaboration between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. It's a remarkable transformation and an incredible efficiency story at the same time.

Many of these success stories are not known to the American public or to the federal workforce. That's a real problem. If we want to see great activity inside the government, we need to highlight and publicize within and without the great things that are going on.

Max, employee satisfaction and engagement are two necessary ingredients in developing high-performing organizations and attracting top talent. The Partnership's *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings are a valuable tool in recognizing the importance of employee satisfaction and ensuring that it is a top priority for government managers. Would you tell us more about this survey?

— Max Stier —

I have no doubt that it has had the most impact of all the things that we do. Our *Best Places to Work in the Federal*





Government rankings measure employee satisfaction and commitment. To my mind there's two root causes related to the challenges facing the federal government: [first,] the short-term political leader may not align with the long-term needs of the organizations they run. Equally problematic is the lack of real-time information about performance.

In the public sector you can't reduce your performance to financial metrics in all instances. Your goals are public goods that aren't easily reduced to financial P&L statements, or a stock price. There [is] strong correlation between employee engagement and overall performance. The Partnership provides the tools and resources needed to start improving employee engagement and commitment. This year is really important because this will be the first time that there'll be close to a full census of federal employees. A number of agencies have done smaller samples, but now they're going to be able to dig deeper inside their organizations and see what's going on. All in all I'm just thrilled by what's happened.

We are still on the uphill climb in terms of opportunities for creating a more useful instrument. The census is one example of how [we] might improve things. Secondly we're trying to get the Hill to understand that they no longer have to just simply pay attention to the three or four disgruntled employees that come knocking on their door. They actually have data and can hold agencies accountable.

Our related workshops and resources help agency leaders turn their *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* data into workforce solutions that drive real results. This approach can help agencies use employee data to generate quick wins and identify long-term strategic improvements.

The program has done much. We had a town hall during Public Service Recognition Week. Three cabinet secretaries and two other agency heads were on a panel moderated by Cokie Roberts. She asked about the best places to work and what these leaders were doing in light of their agency performance. What was remarkable to me is that each panelist knew where their agency ranked in the survey. That told me we're on the right track here. Just getting leadership to pay attention to it makes it really powerful.

Max, today's government executives face seemingly unprecedented management challenges. In what specific ways does the Partnership's *Strategic Advisors to Government Executives (SAGE)* program seek to assist government executives to meet these challenges?

— Max Stier —

This program seeks to connect senior-level executives in government with their predecessors who are now in the private sector, providing them an opportunity to leverage prior public-sector experience to transform government and improve its performance. The Partnership is an ideal platform for knowledge transfer—bridging the private sector talent that used to be in the public sector and the public sector talent that's new to their position. SAGEs engage their public-sector counterparts through workshops, thought leadership sessions, expert roundtables, and two-day orientation boot camps. SAGEs share knowledge, ideas, and best practices to help these federal executives enhance their ability to carry out their required responsibilities, contributing to more efficient and effective government leadership. These officials are granted access to a unique network of subject matter experts who want to give back to government and continue their involvement in public service.

Max, you have noted that a stronger Senior Executive Service (SES) is the single most important thing that can be done to improve government performance. Would you review challenges facing the federal government's leadership corps and outline your recommendations for strengthening the federal government's Senior Executive Service?

— Max Stier —

To me, the SES is a critical cohort because they stand on top of the career workforce. There are 2,000,000+ federal workers. There are 7,000 SESers. They survive the political transition, so if you're going to have an organization that's healthy across the choppy divides of transition you need a great SES core. Only eight percent of SESers move agencies



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once they become SES members and very few of them come from candidate development programs, which are programs that actually have mobility components as part of them.

Here's what should change. We ought to require folks going into the SES to have a breadth of experience. They should be people who have either worked in multiple sectors, multiple levels of government, or multiple agencies. We ought to have a process that enables the federal government to draw not just internally for the SES, but outside as well. So one push we've had and we've been trying to assist this administration with is to move to a resume-based hiring process for the SES. If we don't create a process that the rest of the talent market can participate in, then clearly they're not going to come inside government.

We also need to match the great talent that we have against the priorities that we have. It's vital that it be done now both because of the challenges facing government, but also because the turnover that's taking place in the SES is huge. Thirty-five percent of the SES is retirement-eligible. This is the opportunity to remake the SES into a cadre that we need for tomorrow's challenges.

Max, what advice would you give someone who is considering a career in public service?

— Max Stier —

Be persistent. The process is none too easy but it's worth it. I think ... they ought to do it ... because there is no bigger and more impactful stage. Again they just have to go look at those videos of the Sammies winners to see just the extraordinary impact that is possible inside the federal government. It is an amazing environment for those that have the qualities of persistence, public stewardship, and collaboration that make for a successful public servant. There's just nothing like it. ■

To learn more about the Partnership for Public Service, go to www.ourpublicservice.org.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Max Stier, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



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