

**Aspiring Leaders:
Connecticut Department of Administrative Services
May 23, 2013**

I want to thank Claire Nolin, the Department of Administrative Services, the Connecticut Training and Development Network, and the other organizers of this program for inviting me to speak with you today. I am delighted to be with you this morning as part of this “Aspiring Leaders” professional development session. I understand you have been taking courses and seminars in management skills together as well as working on individual projects during the past three months. Many years ago, this curriculum was known as the Connecticut Executive Management Program. It has been preparing public servants of Connecticut for leadership positions in state government for a long time.

I am told this is the fourth annual cohort under the new name, “Aspiring Leaders Executive Development Program.” I think this name is significant. To me, it means that each of you has a desire to lead.

At the same time, I am aware that each of you was nominated by your agency heads for this program. Having a personal interest in leadership wasn’t enough to be here—you were chosen for your leadership potential. You earned the right to be here. Someone saw in you that which you already felt yourself. I have a strong sense that each of you has used that affirmation, your own sense of self, and a commitment to hard work to progress through this program and grow professionally and personally.

The Aspiring Leaders program and the people who run it also represent an important support system for you to take advantage of. As you have worked hard to get here, I am sure you are applying yourself now that you are in this program.

Those three concepts—opportunity, support, and hard work—have marked my own professional life since my days in high school and I will spend some time talking more about them in the context of my own life in a few minutes.

But before I speak about myself, I want to step back to share some ideas I have about leadership. I have borrowed these ideas from experts in the field as well as leaders in their own right. The first point I want to make about leadership is that it is not a position to aspire to, a title to acquire, or a role to assume. That is not to say that organizations don’t have and need leaders.

In fact, this program has produced a number of agency heads and commissioners from the ranks of middle management over the years. You are here today because people believe that many of you will rise to lead a number of our state agencies.

But you don’t have to wait until that time to exercise your leadership skills. In fact, just being here demonstrates that you are doing so already.

Leadership can and should be found throughout an organization. It is an attitude, a perspective on life that we manifest in our daily actions, hopefully in a consistent, dependable way. It is about basing our lives on values and principles that we believe in, and grounding our feelings and thoughts in those values and beliefs. It is about saying what we think—that is a good definition of “honesty.” It is about doing what we say—a simple yet apt definition of being reliable and dependable.

Leadership means living a life of integrity each day, consistently basing our actions on our beliefs, regardless of who we interact with.

I know each of you has a value system that serves as the foundation of your life. I want you to spend some time in the next few days doing an inventory—think about ways in which you have aligned your values with your thoughts, words, and actions. What additional opportunities do you have at work or in your community to turn your attitude of leadership into greater action? Regardless of your position or your role, I suspect you can find new opportunities to demonstrate your leadership.

Let me delve deeper now. I want to share three additional yet fairly simple ideas with you on leadership. There have been many books written on the topic—filling library rooms—but I want to spend our time today on just these three ideas.

1. Leadership is not about leaders—it is about the people they lead and serve. One of the first essays on this subject—The Servant as Leader—was written by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. More recent is the fascinating, data-driven book written on the subject of organizations and their leaders by Jim Collins, the author of “Built to Last,” and “Beyond Positive Thinking.” In his book, “Good to Great,” which represents 20 years of research, Collins and his team of graduate student researchers examined the organizational behavior of 1,450 companies. They were looking for firms that had performed well in their respective markets, and then—for reasons that Collins eventually identified—became “great” companies.

The criterion was fairly simple—to qualify for the second phase of Collin’s research, the companies had to outperform the average stock market performance within their market sector by more than 300 percent over a 15-year period—some were found to outperform their competitors by as much as six times more. Out of 1,450 companies, only eleven fit the bill.

Collins and his team then spent two years interviewing everyone they could find in those 11 companies, and came to some startling yet common sense conclusions. The first thing they discovered is that great companies are led by people who shun the limelight, who focus not on themselves, but instead on the team they assemble and the common work they share. In Collin’s own words, leaders with “charisma” often get in the way of organizational success. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with having a personality.

The arena that Collins was investigating was the private sector where companies have stockholders and profit expectations. In that world, he found that companies that sustained profits over time and enjoyed success as thriving businesses were led by people who focused on their customers, the company, their employees, and the work they did together. They are certainly “people people.”

In the public sector, where “customers” are legislators, taxpayers, and other constituencies, the ability to relate to people is also a must. Humility, a faith that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and the realization that a leader’s role is to encourage and support the work of others are all central to successful leadership in the modern workplace, whether in the private or public sector.

As WalMart founder Sam Walton said, “Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it is amazing what they can accomplish.”

Collins also found that great leaders hire good people. Collins and his researchers found that newly hired leaders in their sample of eleven companies surrounded themselves with a team of like-minded people.

Before embarking on big ideas or making major changes in their organizations, they made sure they had the right team to lead into battle. You also need to be sure that the group

of people around you shares your values, your passion, your willingness to work hard, and your commitment to being the best you can be.

The late organizational guru Stephen Covey (rhymes with “OF-E”) often made the point that of the two chief ingredients of a person’s professional effectiveness—character and competence—you can teach and/or enhance competence to some degree. Character is another matter. It is not easy or always even possible to dictate who you work with. But at the very least, I hope everyone in this room understands how important it is to promote an organizational culture where a common set of core values and a shared vision for the future are clearly articulated, and where integrity is valued.

2. Leadership is about power—not the power that leaders have, but the power they are willing to share. Professor Joseph Rost of the University of San Diego has written that post-industrial leadership inherently involves the sharing of power, with leadership’s role becoming one of facilitating change, persuasion, and building relationships and teams. In today’s world, stability is no longer about maintaining the status quo; you are either moving forward, or falling behind. Stability is about having an organization of people who manage the inevitability of change together. Therefore, good leaders are change agents . . . empowering the people around them to adjust to whatever challenges they must confront.

You can share power within your organization on several levels. Sharing power with your employees means giving them the tools and the freedom to be successful.

Collins makes the point that, “True leadership only exists when people follow when they have the freedom not to.”

Sometimes that means having the confidence to allow the organization to make collective decisions. Sometimes leaders must still make decisions unilaterally after consulting with their employees.

Another role of leaders within an empowered organization is facilitating negotiation and compromise when opposing views are strongly held. And organizations that are willing to listen to and respond to their customers often discover the best advice that they can receive.

At my university, one of our six core values is “empowerment.” We want our staff to feel supported in doing their work. We want faculty to be confident in speaking out on issues and innovating in the classroom. And we want our students to stretch themselves in learning new ways of thinking and discovering new knowledge.

Organizations that see potential in their members rather than limitations, that imagine greatness rather than mediocrity, build cultures where growth and opportunity are valued for everyone. Just as this Aspiring Leaders program is doing, leaders should be preparing their successors.

As Ralph Nader noted, “. . . the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers.”

3. Leadership is not about outfoxing the competition. Let me explain. According to an ancient Greek fable, the fox knew a little bit about a lot of things, and fancied himself to be the smartest animal in the forest. But the hedgehog—have you ever seen a hedgehog?—knew a great deal about one thing, and he focused on that one thing to the exclusion of all other distractions. In *Good to Great*, Collins uses the hedgehog as his symbol of organizational focus, which he calls the “hedgehog principle.”

He discovered that each of the 11 companies that qualified for his book (remember, he started with 1,500 companies!) had their own unique “hedgehog principle,” something they

discovered about themselves that they were passionate about and that they could do better than anyone else in the world.

Kimberly Clark, which up until its transformation was just another papermaking mill in Wisconsin, decided to focus on consumer products. Huggies, Kleenex, Depends, Scott paper towels—they now own and manufacture all the major consumer paper product brands on the market. Gillette decided to focus on creating a superior, dependable razor. Abbott Labs, which was not breaking out of the pack making pharmaceuticals, branched out into hospital supplies and diagnostic equipment.

Walgreens went from being just another pharmacy to a corner convenience store—one that most Americans can find within walking distance and where you can buy everything from birthday cards to shoes.

Another thing that Collins discovered about the 11 companies in his research is that each was able to identify one singular, ultimate measure to gauge their success, a measure that was directly linked to their Hedgehog Principle. Walgreen's measure is "profit per customer visit." By having stores at what appears to be every street corner in America, they ensure themselves of having lots of customer visits. And by diversifying their product line, they can turn single-item buyers into customers walking out of the store having met multiple needs—medicine, toiletries, food, electronics, and more.

Gillette's ultimate measure was profit per customer, testifying to their belief in building customer loyalty through long-lasting, dependable razors. Each of Collin's 11 companies had a similar Hedgehog Principle and a defining measure of success.

At my University, I believe we also have found our hedgehog principle. Perhaps 20 years ago, we were simply the state university serving the east side of the state. Since that time, we have been designated as the public liberal arts college of Connecticut. We have further defined our identity by ensuring that students receive applied, practical learning that grounds their liberal arts education. Everything we do is to support this basic premise—even our tagline expresses our core identity—"A Liberal Education. Practically Applied."

Today, we attract students from 164 of Connecticut's 169 towns. And in the same way that Collins' 11 companies focus on a single measure of success, our fundamental indicator of institutional success—among dozens of measures we look at—is our four-year graduation rate.

We can enroll record numbers of students, we can retain an impressive percentage of freshmen into their sophomore year, we can talk about the GPAs of our athletes, and all manner of other statistics. But our goal is to graduate students on time, and our four-year graduation rate is the measure that tells us how we are doing. Last year, our four-year graduation rate went up 7 percent, and is at an all-time high. We feel good about that, but it also motivates us to ask the question—what will it take to do better?

I would urge you to think about the work you do in your own agency. Of course, you don't have to be the best in the world at what you do—most likely, your agency is the only one in Connecticut providing the services you provide. But you can innovate within that model, and you can work to find ways to be more efficient and more customer-focused.

I challenge you to figure out ways to adapt the Hedgehog Principle to your own workplace. In addition, find a way to measure your success and make improvements along the way, a measure that everyone in your organization, not just leadership, is invested in. That's how good companies and organizations become great companies and organizations.

Serving others, both employees and customers. Empowering others to do their work to their fullest potential. Focusing on the bigger picture. Those are powerful, simple ideas, ideas that I hope ring true to you.

I believe that no matter what job you have in public service in Connecticut, you can find a way to put these ideas to use now, and also when (not if) you find yourself in an expanded position of leadership within your organization or some other form of public service.

In addition to sharing my thoughts on leadership, I was also asked to share some of my own experiences with you. I started off my remarks by noting that each of you, by virtue of being here today, is taking advantage of an opportunity and a support system that has been given you because of your hard work—you have earned the right to be here. I want to tell you a little bit about my own life, because I too have been fortunate. I have had important opportunities put before me during my life, and have received support from my family and others, support without which I would not be standing before you today.

My own contribution to my success has been to accept and take advantage of opportunities when they have presented themselves, and to work hard to justify the faith that has been placed in me. Let me tell a story about those opportunities and special people in my life.

I was born in Puerto Rico, but I grew up in Newark, New Jersey. My parents worked very hard and made huge sacrifices so that I could attend a good Catholic girl's high school. I eventually was accepted at Montclair State College—this was my opportunity. But I would not have made it very far without the support of my freshman English professor, Dr. Morris McGee. Dr. McGee was a WWII and Korean War veteran who had been disabled in the Korean conflict, and was confined to a wheelchair. He was an alumnus of Montclair State College where I went to college, a star football player, recipient of a Purple Heart, and a Shakespearean scholar.

I didn't know it the first day I walked into class, but I was blessed to have Morris McGee for freshman English. I would not have made it through freshman year, let alone the rest of my college years and beyond had it not been for him. His was the support that I needed.

I was the only minority person in the room. In fact, I never saw another Hispanic at Montclair State College. Professor McGee was very good, but I was intimidated in class. As someone whose native language was not English, I knew that my writing skills lacked polish and consistency. I was nervous and apprehensive. I never opened my mouth, never answered a question, and Professor McGee never called on me; I just sat there frozen.

Then it was time for the first writing assignment. I wrote an essay, and when I got it back and saw all the red ink on my paper, I knew I didn't belong in college. At the bottom of my paper, it said, "You need to see me in my office."

The next day I went to Professor McGee's office. When I arrived, he said, "Elsa, you are intelligent and you have a lot of potential but your writing is very, very poor. The only way you are going to get through this course is to come to my office every week and work on your revisions."

Thus began my supplemental instruction sessions with Professor McGee, a time when he taught me how to become a better writer. I worked very hard, spending hours in his office several times a week during my first semester rewriting my essays. Over time, my writing improved and I became more confident that I might actually be able to succeed as a college student.

Throughout the semester, Dr. McGee continued to mentor me and encourage me. Without his steady hand and watchful eye, I have no doubt that my college days would have been short lived.

At the end of the course, I had a solid “B.” I was the only minority student in a class of middle-class, privileged girls, a Puerto Rican immigrant whose native language was Spanish. And I had gained confidence that I could write at a college level.

Tonight, or tomorrow, or later this week, I want each of you think of someone like Dr. McGee in your life and reflect on the impact that person had on your success. This is the power each of us has to make a difference in someone’s life, in a profound, life-changing way.

Let me close by saying that just as you have impressed your agency heads sufficiently to endorse your participation in this program, you also inspire me by your presence here today.

If you continue to adopt an attitude of service and empowerment towards your peers, your employees, and the people your agency serves, your leadership will continue to be noticed and rewarded. You are already taking advantage of opportunity and support—continue to do so with the same diligence that you demonstrate every day on the job. Who knows, I could be calling one or more of you “Commissioner” before all is said and done!