

Peggy's Rules: Peggy McConkey And the Meaning of Public Service

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One of the inevitable consequences of working for years at the Treasury Department is that one builds up a strong attachment to it, its mission, and its people. Even after leaving, one stays in regular contact. So it isn't at all unusual to get messages about Treasury people. And if you happen to be a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Tax Analysis, then you always want to keep up with the news about Peggy McConkey.

Peggy, you see, serves as the executive assistant to the DAS and has done so for about one-and-a-half decades. In truth, she was often in charge and that helped us look good. A recent talk with Peggy brought back to me a thought I've had for some time—that the highest standard for public service is seldom set at the top of the political ladder but rather by people like Peggy. Just imagine, if you will, what type of government we would have if all political appointees were willing to follow Peggy's Rules:

- the goal of this job is this job, not the next one;
- public service is a joy;
- forget the gossip, it's not productive; and
- don't even think about taking what doesn't belong to you.

The goal of this job is this job, not the next one. Peggy's first thought seems always to be how to get her job done the best way possible. There is never a slack time for Peggy; she finds her own ways to improve the office and her own capabilities even when she isn't busy with some other assignment or helping out others.

Contrast that, if you will, with the tendency of some political appointees who seem to think that the purpose of their current job is to serve as a step toward something else. The worst tend to take their colleagues and staff for granted. The failure here is not simply the lack of attention to the needs of their fellow government workers; the greater threat comes from doing little or nothing to build up the institutions for which they work. Furthest from their mind is fixing an office or agency or department so that it can better function in some future in which they will not be around. Don't get me wrong: Some of the best government workers are political appointees who only come for a short period of time. The main distinction is between those who do and do not follow Peggy's rule to care about their current job.

Public service is a joy. Coming to the office to work with Peggy was always a delight. Her friendliness could offset the most difficult of situations, including attempts by outsiders to convert Treasury's tax policy office into nothing more than support troops for some ideology or interest group. She seems to love almost every aspect of her work. She likes working for the public and trying to serve it. Give her something to do and she does twice as much. Give her nothing to do and she figures out ways to enhance her skills, organize what you hadn't thought about organizing, and finds new possibilities in that situation as well.

Peggy probably could have retired a long time ago. One of the anomalies of the government's crazy pension system is that after awhile it can give the worker negative pension accumulation (if measured as the change in value of all expected future pension benefits). I really don't know whether that is the case with Peggy, but I do know of other tax policy staff who faced that situation. Often their love of their work was so great that for awhile they paid a price that really was unfair.

Contrast that attitude, if you will, with some of those at higher levels of government. I can't tell you the number I have met who complained about the sacrifices they have made earning the highest salaries that government has to offer. I remember one meeting with a Cabinet Secretary—someone who had risen in no small part because of his father's name and connections—who argued that the reason he got his job was that no one else wanted it. Right! Just financially—forget about all the other rewards—the contacts made by this person were worth millions when he moved on. Much better would it have been if he had followed Peggy's

rule: Public service is a joy, and that is why he took the job.

Gossip is not allowed. I'll never forget the time soon after Peggy had taken the job in the tax policy office when some petty rumors and complaints were spreading around the office. People tried to pull Peggy into the conversations, but she just walked away. She made it clear to me that she did not believe it to be appropriate, helpful, or productive to play office games. The integrity of her character simply didn't have room for such activities.

Once again make a comparison with discussions that take place so frequently at the highest political level. You don't need to be an insider, just listen to campaign talk. Much of it—sometimes all of it—is totally personal in nature. It is quite common, for instance, for one person or administration to be against a policy simply because someone or some political party they didn't like was for it. The jokes, the innuendoes, the digs at others' character can form a significant portion of the discussion. Like most forms of gossip, these are engaged partly to establish the superiority of the gossips over those whom they are attacking. And like most forms of gossip, they are harmful not simply because of their insidious nature, but because they displace other, more important conversations of policy and administration that need to take place. Just imagine what national policy discussions would be like if Peggy's rule was followed and it was the issue, not the person, that was always kept at the center of attention.

Don't even think about taking what doesn't belong to you. Peggy had no problem with the standard rule applying to government employees: One doesn't accept gifts—not even a free lunch—from anyone who might be petitioning the government for something. What the government holds on behalf of the people belongs to the people. No one would even think of trying to influence Peggy to grant an appointment or get any other type of favor by giving her something. And it isn't even in the realm of thought that Peggy would take something out of the office.

Why, then, does the standard seem to become looser the higher one rises in the pecking order—the more power, influence, and money one has and is likely to get? Clinton's removal of White House gifts, I think, tells us something not just about his standards, but, about society's in general.

Many political appointees also spend their taxpayer-compensated time engaging in activities that simply would not be allowed of civil servants. Some don't really view their time on the job as being paid for by the public. Perhaps all of this simply reflects the extraordinary sense of entitlement that many feel in our society. Alas, if only Peggy's rule were followed, how much more could be done to ensure the public got the service it deserves, and how much more unlikely it would be that someone would abscond with either time or goods that really aren't theirs.

Speaking for a whole lot of people—thanks, Peggy!

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