

The Clever Civil Servant & Managing Government Culture

By Alex Roithmayr

Being Discussed

- The old view of Civil Service
- Being a “clever” Civil Servant
- The “Island Method” of Civil Service
- The Clever Civil Servant’s Toolbox

My name is Alex Roithmayr
Chief of Staff for Assemblyman David
Buchwald

- I have been working for Assemblyman Buchwald since 2013. Starting as his Community Liaison and now as his Chief of Staff for the last three years.
- The District goes from the City of White Plains to North Salem
- About 130k Residents live in the district including Chevy Chase and the Clintons

During this time in civil service

I have been with a team that was able to effect real change.

Including:

- Changing the State Constitution
- Allowing Congress to request State Tax Returns
- Changed State policy regarding Tesla Dealerships
- Got the State DMV to make internal changes
- Created a bipartisan team to take on ConEd
- Countless constituent cases



Old Thinking Civil Service

- In my time in Government I found that most of the job can be done by sticking to your lane.
- I interacted with some people who were there for health benefits or their pensions and were happy with sticking in their lane.
- I also found some who are very passionate about government but were often eventually disheartened through the nature of bureaucracy

Bureaucrat is not a bad word

Bureaucrat is used as if it is a curse word but this is entirely unfair.

To me, a bureaucrat is someone who works for the people.

Where the rubber meets the road when it comes to constituent service

Too often politicians or heads of agencies get all the credit but we all know that the reason anything works is because of the people behind the scenes.

This is a very powerful position if the influence is applied properly.

Always Strive to be better in public service

- Civil Service is like sweeping. Its easy to learn but impossible to master.
- Meaning: on an individual basis and on an organizational culture level, we should all strive to be better for the betterment of the public
- That all being said, bureaucracy is in place to produce consistency and the old method of civil service maintains this. To change an organizational culture and thus its core methods of doing something can be dangerous

Messing with what works

- The danger of a civil servant messing with a bureaucratic process is that is the method is tweaked too much the system can break down.
- A process that is effective 50% of the time is at least 50% effective. We as civil servants do not have the ability to shut a process down to try and make it more effective.
- So how do we effect change in the name of striving to work better for our constituents?

Being Empowered but also Being Clever

- Empowered - give (someone) the authority or power to do something
- Clever - mentally quick and resourceful or marked by wit or ingenuity
- A civil servant should rely on both but the old way of civil service mainly relies on a civil servant to feeling empowered to do the job at hand without much authenticity
- Bureaucracy demands consistency but this can be to creative problem solving
- Yet the bureaucracy exists to serve the public and as civil servants we must always strive to work better for the people we serve. How do we maintain this balance?

Be A Clever Civil Servant

- An empowered civil servant is not a bad thing in the slightest but is a mindset that is more in tune with a more classic view of civil service. More strictly mission oriented and a product of the organizational culture.
- A Clever Civil Servant is everything that an empowered CS is but more. The CCS is also mission oriented, but is also an active participant in advancing the organizational culture

It is through this lens of being a clever civil servant that I will be speaking to today. A clever civil servant is mission oriented but is also always looking to grow. Grow first as an individual bureaucrat but knowing that individual growth can translate to organizational growth. Change is often inevitable but not always timely. Meaning that change namely comes from outside situations, from the top down or incrementally from the bottom/middle and up. A clever civil servant looks for these opportunities and capitalizes on it.



Example: Constitutional Amendment

- In the mid 2010's, the speaker of the NYS Assembly Sheldon Silver and the Senate Majority Leader, Dean Skelos were both arrested and eventually convicted for public corruption for their abuse of power. The very next day after Dean Skelos became a felon, he applied for his public pension.
- At the time, David Buchwald had a bill that would strip public pensions from corrupt public officials who are convicted. Before Sheldon Silver and Dean Skelos were convicted and were still in power, this bill did not get much traction. Despite public and good government support for such a measure Albany was not “culturally their yet”.

After Albany leadership got arrested and convicted an opportunity to change the culture of Albany presented itself. Our office followed up with reporters at the NYT's and leveraged a timely OpEd about how in light of recent events now would be the time to address the culture of Albany, especially when it came to ethics and pensions. When **Albany leadership goes down for public corruption, that's not a good thing but it does create an opportunity for all of us in state government to be better.** Our office was poised to use this opportunity window and eventually led to the NYS constitution to be forever changed.

This is a very straight forward example where being a clever civil servant and where obvious opportunities of failure in leadership led to incremental changes that has a wider effect on organizational culture. In this instance, if you are a public official your pension is only yours if you do not betray the public trust.

This was a change to the business as usual Albany Legislature Culture.



The Clever Civil Servant

I attribute the success of changing the State Constitution to me and our team being clever. We were able to maintain the office but be situationally aware of the opportunity at hand. While Albany pecking orders were being reestablished, our office used this time not to advance ourselves politically but to advance a movement.

This method of approach to influence and power ultimately managed to both get our legislative agenda established by the time a new leader was announced and raised the clout of the office.

Maintaining the Balance through the Island Method

- To maintain this balance of being mission oriented, clear in my objectives but also free enough to be creative in my role in a government office - I use the “Island Method”
- Island Method was originally created to keep me on track as a Community Liaison but since becoming Chief of Staff I have used the Island Method more for team building and general management.



The Island Method Components

- Each “Island” is a different aspect or component of the office or team
- The “Water” is the organization, the boss, or the mission at hand
- The “Boat” is the manager or team leader



The Island

First takeaway is that each Island is connected. Either through each being in contact with the water, the manager on the boat or the connections each Island makes to each other, they are all connected.



Island continued

- Ironically, in the island method.. No individual is an island. This topography/ecosystem depends on the visiting boat, other Islands and the water to conceptually understand how each Island belongs in the environment around them.



The Water

- The water is the boss, the mission or the organization as a whole
- The water gives the islands purpose and should be respected as such.
- The water dictates the directives of the islands while also at times being malleable to make seismic changes



The Boat

- The team leader or manager does not have an island. The Manager has a boat to visit each Island from time to time to make sure that all the projects are being maintained and growth within the Island is in line with the mission.
- The boat will also visit Islands during times of droughts or when a tsunami might strike.
- Generally, if a manager is living on the Island that you know that Island is maintaining its proper output

Example: A NYS Assembly Office

- There are three islands that make up the sea of the 93rd Assembly District. These are **Communications Island, District Office Relations Island and Legislative Island**. The Assemblyman is the water.. I am in the boat.
- The importance of each Island fluctuates given the time of year and what is being accomplished.
- The Assemblyman attention and focus (floods and droughts) can comes in spurts so it is my job to make sure each Island is ultimately prepared for both.

Examining the Island

- The key to understanding the Island Method is examining what makes up an island. Each Island is made up of a group or individual that is responsible for some aspect of public service.
- On the island there are preexisting structures and infrastructure that needs to be maintained. Also on the island there is undeveloped land that, in the right circumstances, can be developed.

Examining the Island continued

- First - the preexisting structures are the most important parts of the island. They are the reason the Island exists in the first place. Using my Assembly office, an example of this would be District office Relations Island. The largest structure on the Island is Constituent Service. Anyone coming into a position, such as a community liaison or district office director, would have to understand that Constituent Service is the most important part of their job.

Examining the Island continued

- After and only after competent management of constituent service is met can moving onto the development of the rest of the island can be done.
- In this instance, development of annual small business forums and senior health fares are good goals for an incoming Community Liaison but should sought only after active constituent cases are being attended to.

The Island: The Balance of Maintenance and Growth

- This mindset is found in all the Islands. There are aspects of their job that are inherent and central to the job at hand but there is also room for each individual to grow and explore. All the while this growth within the confines of that Island.

Management of the Island

- This method of management and thinking allows for individuals to realize they are part of a bigger team, the parameters of their role, places to be creative and places to not and maintains that balance between empowered and being clever.
- The Island is excellent for onboarding new employees or teammates. Conceptually, it is easy to understand.
- Once the individual understands their role in government and how they can be most effective.

The Use of this Mindset

- The Island Method has served me well. When I was first starting out in government, I wanted to be clever all the time and single handily make the title bureaucrat something to be proud of again... I quickly fell on my face
- I eventually learned the being clever was circumstantial and learning the methods and ways of bureaucracy is the bedrock of my role in government.
- To maintain this balance, I developed the Island Method and through this method of balance I have been able to capitalize on circumstances to be clever.

The Clever Civil Servant Toolbox

- The “simple intern”
- The “not-for-nothing”
- The “bureaucrat-to-bureaucrat”
- The Wagon Wheel

Are all methods our office have developed to deal with a number of situations.



The Simple Intern

- Is a mindset and not actually having an intern deal with the issue

-But-

- The Simple Intern is a move where the individual believes in the system supremely of Bureaucracy
- Lots of “We” language
- Example: The Flooding Farm



The Not-for-Nothing

- Is the “tough guy” of the toolbox
- Takes a little more attitude but comes from a place of service or using your influence for the best
- “my job is to call you everyday” or “my job it to go through you or talk to (bosses name) but I need X to get done”
- Example: Summer Camp / Phone lines



VectorStock®

VectorStock.com/22969921

Bureaucrat-to-Bureaucrat

- This is like the “not-for-nothing” but much less confrontational
- It’s a level of common frustration
- “Hey I am sorry to bother you again but I need X and I don’t want to keep bothering you but bureaucrat-to-bureaucrat I need you to be my hero here”
- Example: interoffice relations



The Wagon Wheel

- This is a method that incorporates aspects of the other three.
- It's a way of keeping momentum moving forward without it being solely dependent on one individual
- Each spoke is a different effort in the momentum
- Example: The New York Truth Act

In conclusion

- Bureaucrat is not a bad word
- Making change is often incremental
- Being clever is situational



Thank you