

## SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



### Recap of 2/28/22 conversation with Dr. Linda Cureton

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

The week before last, we had an exceptionally candid conversation with Linda Cureton, CEO of Muse Technologies, Inc., former CIO of NASA, and active member of the Partnership for Public Service's CIO-SAGE (Strategic Advisors to Government Executives) network.

This grounded, funny, wily leader adapted readily to the unique requirements of our flat conversational space, reminding me of her original title, "*The adaptable bureaucracy: Is this an oxymoron or is it possible to make lasting change in stubborn organizations?*" Linda shared three anecdotes with us before arriving at a slide that depicts the positive conclusion she reached during her 34-year career:

**We Had What We Needed All Along**

Enabling Leadership: How do we make it easy/cheap/safe?

Adaptive Leadership: How do we: Add diversity? Seek ways to improve? Encourage experimentation?

Administrative Leadership: How do we leverage strength of the bureaucracy?

Me: 

*Muse*

(The full deck will be posted to our events page with this recap – link below.)

Linda showed the breadth and common sense of her thinking and practice in a statement she made to illustrate diversity of thought: If you're going to move forward on a project that hasn't been done before, bring the lawyers into the discussion early to make it bulletproof and thus implementable.

Her response to the discomfort that often accompanies experimentation and innovation is, "Your discomfort is not actionable." I.e., if you have a real issue, put it on the table instead of complaining. Change is hard; it takes conflict resolution skills and other "soft skills," which have not been viewed as valuable.

Stories were told and notes were compared in this session's unusually senior gathering on such topics as "the ambush" (for which public affairs training is necessary) and psychological safety (Amy Edmondson worked with NASA after the shuttle disaster).

Linda explained the risk matrix (likelihood x impact), a way to think about risks that increases their visibility and improves decision making. She asked us which agencies we thought were the most and least innovative, and what "smart" really means, and said that "innovative" doesn't have to mean recreating the wheel.

She talked about courageous leadership and "big corruption vs. little teeny corruption," asking "Do you know what you're doing?" before sharing a personal example, and then said something that I think must be pivotal to her continued achievement, "How dare I think I'm more important than you? That's how corruption grows."

Finally, there was a robust exchange that essentially catalogued all the ways she and other participants have dealt with poor performers, that kicked off with her question, "What could I have done better about the bad apples?". I imagined the tacit knowledge transfer that would have been so valuable for newer supervisors to hear and regretted that none were in attendance. Linda reminded us of Gallup's extensive employee engagement research and said that just figuring out how to influence "actively disengaged" employees (who act out their unhappiness) to become "not engaged" employees – even if they don't become what Gallup defines as "engaged" – boosts organizational capacity.

A week later, I bought Linda's book, [\*The Leadership Muse\*](#). One sentence in the description on the web stood out: "And in her accounts of how the Muse has appeared to her, Mrs. Cureton teaches us how to meet the Muse in our own journey and become leaders capable of heroic feats of wisdom, grace and courage." That was certainly my experience during this session.

## Participant affiliations

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter  
Charlestown, RI Town Council, Retired  
Department of Education, Retired  
Department of Energy  
Helsinki School of Economics (Consultant to Finnish Government & elsewhere)  
KM/HR Systems Auditors (Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Retired)  
Muse Technologies, Inc. (NASA, Retired)  
Securities and Exchange Commission (U.S. Coast Guard, Retired)  
Small Business Administration (and President, PMF Alumni Association)

Participants joined from the Washington, DC Metro Area; Wickford, RI; Colorado Springs, CO; Pullman, WA; and Helsinki, Finland.

Each time, we discover commonalities and warm up the space by beginning with a round of introductions. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,  
Kitty Wooley



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