

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Recap of June 6th, 2019 Video Conversation with Bill Valdez, SEA

Yesterday's conversation segued from a round of self-introductions into a skillful interview of SEA President Bill Valdez conducted by long-time SFF supporter and federal executive Kriste Jordan Smith, who currently serves at TSA. Bill's remarks and the ensuing Q&A occurred in a collegial, somewhat intimate atmosphere: ten of us joined from the DC metro area, Dallas, Colorado Springs, and Charlestown, RI. Employment affiliations included SEA, DHS, Architect of the Capitol, Jack Welch Management Institute, GAO, Concerning Learning LLC, and Charlestown Town Council. We were together for 90 minutes—no one was in a hurry to leave. The session also allowed for further tailoring of communication protocols to the flat, many-way video conversations we're undertaking in earnest this year. As we practice, these conversations will become even more valuable. They will complement - not replace - the in-person professional development dinners and breakfasts we've held since 2003.

When his predecessor retired in 2016, Bill became President of the Senior Executives Association (SEA). He was charged by the board with setting the strategic direction to guide its reinvention for a new generation of SES that was interested in more than advocacy. The strategic direction's four pillars are available at <https://seniorexecs.org/about/strategic-direction-sea>. One of the implications of having a broader strategic direction that included professionalizing federal leadership was that SEA membership would have to be opened up to employees at earlier stages in their careers. That would energize the pipeline for the SES and align with the modern perception that everybody can be a leader. (In 1978, a leader was an executive. Now overemphasis on command and control reduces retention.) Initially, there was some resistance to adding new membership categories from members who valued the SEA's exclusivity and mission as they stood and who were concerned that the prestige of the SES might be diminished. However, in light of the fact that only 6% of feds were under 30 years of age, something had to change. The idea now is that the SEA should not only *defend the profession* of career federal executive but should also invite younger members to exercise muscle to *build the profession*. Accordingly, SEA now extends membership and engagement opportunity (through new "Communities of Change") for GS-12 through GS-15 employees who are not yet eligible for full SEA membership.

Bill told us about his initial "apology tour," during which he visited 89 different groups to mend fences if necessary and to ask what their leaders saw as the SEA's natural role. He learned that there was near consensus around the roles of *trusted partner* and *convenor*. When someone asked what gave SEA the authority to convene organizations

to develop professional leadership standards and instigate academic exploration of differences between government and private sector leadership, Bill answered that SEA was filling a void – “We do it because nobody else is.” MOUs have been signed with many of those groups, ranging from the National Academy of Public Administration to Federal Asian Pacific American Council (FAPAC) and Young Government Leaders (YGL), in order to form a coalition of the willing and facilitate cooperative engagement where interests align. In addition, conversations have occurred with the Project Management Institute and the American Bar Association, because each has the ethical statement, self-governance, and professional assessment and certification standards that characterize a profession. “The SEA could end up as an ABA-like entity.”

An SEA study conducted by the IBM Center for the Business of Government, University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs, and Indiana University has resulted in four case studies. In addition, the SEA is working with two research frameworks, including the Partnership for Public Service’s. This is important because almost all research to date has focused on advancing private sector leadership, which has key differences. Jim Collins’s *Good to Great in the Social Sectors* is rare in that it seeks to apply academic rigor to organizations that aren’t driven by profit, although Collins acknowledges that it’s more observational than quantitatively derived. One area where research and rigor are much needed is calculating the ROI for leadership development programs in the federal sector. Even the exemplar program mentioned below, which has been doing this work for twenty years, doesn’t have a satisfactory ROI methodology.

Board Chair Karl Schneider’s question, whether a military leadership model could be expanded governmentwide, resulted in last year’s completion of a new framework for public service leadership. It is based on the Air Force’s model, which has been identified as the exemplar program in federal government so far. SEA is partnering with OPM’s Suzanne Logan to hold two sessions at the innovation lab in July in order to build consensus around the framework and update competencies and pathways. The competencies are broken out by *technical* competencies (e.g., decision analysis, risk management) and *behavioral* ones along the lines of the Executive Core Qualifications. SEA doesn’t intend to create leadership development content itself; however, a wide variety of partners, e.g., American University, Management Concepts, Harvard, and the Partnership for Public Service are beginning implementation.

Bill also referred us to the [Ten Considerations For Civil Service Modernization](#) that resulted from last year’s dialogues co-hosted with the Hoover Institution. They provide context for understanding the leadership framework. He emphasized the use of the word *modernization*, not *reform*, by saying that the reform (Civil Service Reform Act of 1978) has already occurred, whereas this year’s focus is on implementing the ten considerations. “Words matter.”

As you can see, the Senior Executives Association has evolved! We're grateful to Bill Valdez for his having spent quality time on this conversation. If you're a federal employee at the GS-12 grade or above, the welcome mat is out at SEA and you are invited to explore becoming a member. If you're a mentor, please spread the word.