



Ten tough public service jobs

Pick an adjective to describe leadership in the public service today. Challenging? Frustrating? Impossible? Or how about “rewarding”?

The latter is actually what we most often heard when interviewing senior public servants for one of our latest studies: Ten Tough Jobs 2010. Updating a report published by the Public Policy Forum several years ago, we took a fresh look at the nature of leadership in the public service, profiling 10 positions across the federal government, mostly at the assistant deputy minister-level. We view these as exemplars of the kind of leadership jobs near the very top of the public service today. And we decided to stick with the word “tough.”

Why a fresh look? Today’s reality includes new accountabilities, an impulse toward greater transparency, an extended period of minority governments and sweeping generational change. All of which prompted us to ask a number of important questions, including: What are the leadership attributes required to be successful in the federal public service? Are they changing? If so, how? And what are the implications for public service management?

Predictably, we found that several elements of leadership remain the same today as in the past. Strong leaders must inspire. They must provide clear direction and vision. They must see the big picture and make solid strategic decisions. They must be strong communicators and build effective relationships. And they must be good managers of dollars, people, process and information. These core attributes are important for all leaders regardless of sector – and they’ve stood the test of time.

There are, however, some important differences facing today’s public service. With a greater emphasis on accountability and transparency, complexity has increased – on individual issues and in the relationships between issues. And there is now a

greater focus on service delivery at the expense of policy development. While many of the resulting changes are positive, some have potentially negative consequences. These must be carefully managed to ensure that the public service contributes as effectively as possible in building and delivering strong government.

What follows are drivers and the resultant skills that are more valued today than previously.

First, a greater focus on accountability and transparency requires public service leaders to take into account and respond to a broader range of partnerships in the process of governance. This results in less time available to devote to primary goals and objectives. Accountability frameworks are important tools, but they’re insufficient to ensure strong public management. In designing these frameworks, senior public servants must also ensure that they’re aligning their resources and efforts behind the results that are most important. Doing this well often requires challenging trade-offs. While clear accountabilities are essential, there is a risk of developing too many rules and regulations, thereby reducing the focus on what’s most important.

Senior public servants must be careful not to go too far in compromising the outcomes of their work – “what they achieve” – in service of the process for obtaining them – “how those results are achieved.” They must also ensure that accountability, results and risk management frameworks are developed and used as management tools to drive better outcomes for citizens. Without a focus on strategic impact and organizational learning, these critical planning tools risk becoming processes and documents that merely explain and defend past actions.



TEN TOUGH JOBS 2010

1. Regional Director General, Maritimes, Department of Fisheries and Oceans
2. Assistant Deputy Minister, Consular Services and Emergency Management, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade
3. Assistant Deputy Minister, First Nations & Inuit Health Branch, Health Canada
4. Assistant Deputy Minister, Human Resources Services Branch, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
5. Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy and Strategic Direction, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
6. Assistant Deputy Minister, Spectrum, Information, Technologies and Telecommunications, Industry Canada
7. Assistant Deputy Minister, Finance and Corporate Services, National Defense
8. Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Communications and Consultations Secretariat, Privy Council Office
9. Assistant Deputy Minister, Diseases and Emergency Preparedness, Public Health Agency of Canada
10. Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management, Treasury Board Secretariat

