

Senior Executive Service Class
Graduation Speech
December 2008

Good morning! I am profoundly honored to join this outstanding group of civil servants. I'd like to offer a very special recognition of Bob Ashworth, who was part of this senior executive class. I knew and admired Bob. I extend my deepest sympathies to his family and friends.

I just returned from Florida, where I met with Dan Kimball, Superintendent of the Everglades National Park. Bob spent part of his training in Florida working on Everglades Restoration. His colleagues there so deeply appreciated his work. Bob was a leader of people and a champion of conservation.

Those gathered here are leaders of economy, environment, culture, community, science, education, governance, and administration. You need no lessons in leadership. All of you have your own sagas of leadership and service.

But let me share a few thoughts about my own operational framework—one that transcends the world of Washington and transcends public and private spheres of action. There are many tomes on leadership that describe many attributes of leadership. But I want to center on four attributes—courage, conviction, confidence, and collaboration.

We all understand the significance of courage. Each of us can think of great leaders who stepped forward to change the course of human events.

I remember, growing up, first learning of Harriet Tubman. Born an enslaved person, Harriet Tubman sought liberty. Then—again and again—she put her own life at risk to bring others out of slavery to freedom. We need no reminder of her courage.

But I want to talk about perhaps a subtler kind of courage that accompanies leadership—the courage in the daily workplace to think outside the box. Several of you pioneered organization changes—for example, at the U.S. Geological Survey and at the Bureau of Land Management.

Organization structures and cultures imprint the workplace. Changing those structures sometimes touches organization culture and practice. Such change is not easy. It takes the courage of thinking outside the box.

The courage of creativity, of thinking outside the box, is critical to leadership. Consider the tale of unsung heroes of the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in Alaska who thought outside the box. The Service biologists, through emergent science, had identified declines in albatross populations that were likely connected to certain fisheries practices.

Routine resolution of the problem, in times past, might have resided in stopping the fishing altogether. But such an approach would have carried with it enormous impacts on

real people. Instead, FWS leaders knocked on doors of fishermen and women. They described the problem. They invited their ideas for solutions. The fishing community came up with new fishing practices that would be less likely to harm albatross. The result was reduction in harm to the albatross while still maintaining fishing in the area. Our FWS folks resolved a problem by thinking outside the box jointly with the local community.

Each of you has similar tales in your own workplace. Often, these tales spring from a recognition of the importance of “local knowledge”—the knowledge of time, place, and situation; the knowledge that comes from experience and “boots on the ground.” These tales of problem solving often come from recognizing that answers don’t always reside at headquarters. They result from a recognition that, as poet Wallace Stevens once wrote: “Perhaps real truth resides in a walk around the lake.”

So, too, do successes emerge from recognition that “no man—or woman—is an island.” Leadership resides in tapping the knowledge and imagination of many.

I perused the work assignments of the Senior Executive Service graduates gathered here today. Throughout your work appears a common thread of this sort of partnering, communicating, and engaging the imagination of many. Several of you worked on workplace communications. Four of you spent time in parks enhancing partnerships. One deepened environmental partnerships in an international context. One of you helped build consensus around seemingly intractable issues at Klamath Basin.

I now come to a second dimension of courage—the courage to be humble. Every single person is important and special. Washington is a place of rankings and titles. But we must never forget that each and every person deserves respect. Each person has something to offer. Leadership is about searching for that excellence. Leadership is about the ability to say: “Wow! That’s a job well done.” It is also about the ability to say: “Oops! I goofed.”

Leadership requires the courage to be different. It requires the courage to be humble. Leadership requires these dimensions of courage. In my job, every once in awhile, it also requires the courage to climb into a shark tank. I mean this literally and metaphorically.

Last year, I visited Veracruz, Mexico. I was there for dedication of an aquarium. At the end of the ceremony, the aquarium managers asked if I’d like to climb into the shark tank and feed the sharks. What, I asked, did that entail?

It turns out that climbing into the shark tank involved donning a wet suit, entering a small plastic cubicle with holes in it, and being lowered into the water till the cage was submerged. Because it had holes, water entered the cage as we were lowered into the tank. Physics, of course, were at work, with the cage displacing some water so that a small airspace for our chest and heads remained.

Hmmm, I wondered. How much air do we need down here? I nonchalantly asked how long we would be under the water, hoping for five minutes. “Oh, about twenty minutes,”

I was told. I did wonder about that but tried, instead, to enjoy being eyeball to eyeball with 14-foot sharks.

The next step in this adventure was to put tuna slabs on plastic sticks, which we then extended through the holes, offering dinner to the sharks. I am not sure this was an OSHA compliant exercise, but unique the experience surely was. Down there in the shark tank, peering at the impressive shark teeth, I felt right at home after my years in Washington.

Courage—one way or another—is important. So, too, does leadership require conviction.

Success in any endeavor, it seems to me, centers on “seizing the day”—doing something you love. I once heard the comment: “if you love your work, you’ll never work a day in your life.”

While at Interior, I met a great woman executive who deeply inspired me. She often talks of her mother’s wisdom. This leader at Interior, now retired, was phenomenally dynamic as she led many conservation partnership programs. I’ll borrow from the wisdom of her mother. Her mother, she said, always told her: “No deposit, no return.” That “deposit” springs from a conviction that what you are doing is important—that you are making a difference in the world. And you are—each of you is making a difference. You are touching the lives of the people of this Nation.

Four of you—in different ways—strengthened our environmental toolkit, working on Endangered Species, migratory birds, and National Environmental Policy Act implementation. These tools help Interior, other agencies, and companies lend caring hands to landscapes and wildlife. These tools are delivery mechanisms, but conservation success ultimately resides in a conviction that conservation is important.

Conviction that one’s job is important, evident in the passion of Interior employees, is a building block of leadership. That conviction I sense among each of you, whether in conservation, water management, mapping, or insular affairs. The list goes on.

As we gather today, I want to mention another leader that I had a chance to learn more about this year. Like Harriet Tubman, this leader is another woman. Mary McCleod Bethune’s life is instructive as we contemplate leadership through conviction.

Bethune was the daughter of parents born into slavery. She had a passion for education. She wanted to help African American girls. She opened a school in 1904 in Florida. The school had no equipment. She used crates for desks. The school had not ink, so Bethune and her students made ink from crushed elderberries. She financed the school through baking pies and making ice cream. Eventually, her small school grew—and became a college.

Mary McCleod Bethune was a person of conviction. She was also a person of confidence. Conviction without confidence will yield only limited results.

I now come to the third leadership attribute. We all need confidence, the self-assurance to act. But that assurance must come from a strong sense of purpose: “What is the mission?” “What are our goals?”

Success in any organization, large and small, is about knowing where you are trying to go and measuring progress. Consider as a metaphor mankind’s quest to measure longitude. This tale, told in a book by Dava Sobel entitled *Longitude*, recounts the events of October 1707 when the entire British fleet was lost, not in battle, but on the rocks of the Scilly Isles. The flagship smashed into the rocks and every other ship in the fleet followed blindly behind to destruction. Four warships were lost and 2,000 sailors lost their lives. Why? They lost their lives because there was still no way to measure longitude. The British navy knew where they wanted to go but not how to measure progress.

This tale is, I believe, an apt metaphor for the workplace and leadership. Great courage, conviction, and confidence are imperative. But these qualities must center on a strong sense of purpose, mission, and clearly articulated goals.

Several of you worked on performance measures in different contexts. One of you worked on a monitoring project—a key aspect of any effort to evaluate performance. Performance requires, too, the technical knowledge to get a job done.

Many of you gained experiential knowledge of key issues—water, energy, endangered species. Some strengthened your technical knowledge of the budgeting and administrative backbones of program delivery.

As I thought about this gathering today, as I thought about courage, conviction, confidence, and collaboration, I decided I had left out one other important “C” of leadership. That fifth element is the imperative of civility.

Civility is perhaps the greatest civic virtue. Our interactions in the workplace are not about “winning debates.” Conversation is about communicating. Communication requires civility.

I am always struck by the wisdom of author William Isaacs who describes dialogue—communications—as conversation with a center, not sides. I believe truly great leaders must nurture such conversations.

I am delighted to honor all of you as you continue your careers of excellence, as you inspire other leaders around you, and, above all, as you serve the American people.

My days at Interior—and within the Federal government—are coming to a close. It has been a great, great—indeed, indescribable—privilege to have worked as part of this Federal family these past eight years. I thank you and your colleagues for your leadership. I thank you for your friendship. I thank you for deepening my own appreciation and celebration of this magnificent Nation, its people, its places, its wildlife.

