

"Perspectives"  
Technical Women's Organization  
Cape Cod, MA  
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Prepared Remarks for Carolyn Blum

When you give a speech, just about everyone has advice on what to say. Especially when you're going to speak to a "women's" group.

I had read somewhere that the first 30 seconds of a speech are the most critical, the most important. That's the time when the audience -- that would be you -- decides whether to listen or whether to have an out-of-body experience. T-D-Y to Aruba without ever leaving your chair.

So just about everybody had more than a few suggestions about how to begin this speech. One person said: "Tell them how important they are." No good, I said. I want to say more.

Then someone came up with a great idea. A 30-minute discussion of the 24 global positioning satellite constellation that will be complemented by the implementation of the wide area augmentation system. [pause] Terrific program. However, sometimes "R"-and-"D" stands for real and dry.

So much for suggestions. [pause] What I'll do today is be myself. I'm going to share with you my perspective on life in this agency, life in the government, and a few thoughts on life in general. What I'll say will be to the point, and I'm not going to mince words. [pause] And for those of you who decide to opt for an out-of-body experience, I'll ring a little bell when I'm through. [pause]

Point number one. Life in the agency. As far as I'm concerned, working for this agency is great and getting greater by the moment. We stand at the brink of a technological precipice that is going to launch us into the next century. And well beyond.

Let me give you an idea where I'm coming from. I rose up through the ranks as a quote "technical expert." I started as a G-S 5 procurement clerk fresh out of American University, way back when in 19 [pause] way back when will do. In any event, I rose up through the ranks staring at forms and procurement requests, making sure the rules were followed.

Today, I manage an organization that in every sense of the word will determine what aviation will look like tomorrow AND the next day. The formal title of the group is the executive directorate for systems development. I am involved with nitty-gritty of the agency's multi-billion dollar capital investment program, which as you know is taking aviation from the vacuum tube and giving it a micro-chip.

I've been involved with some less pleasant topics -- the microwave landing system, the advanced automation system. But even in the face of the programs that have this agency and the Congress and the industry and perhaps many of you scratching your collective heads, I have learned and am learning that our business today is exciting. The Wright Brothers changed history with a flight that lasted 12 seconds and covered about 40 yards. Now, just a little more than 90 years later, we are conceiving projects that will predict, anticipate and solve air traffic control problems BEFORE they occur. That's AIR-UH (AERA).

We're making great strides toward eliminating those mid-winter trips to the top of a mountain to check circuit boards. That's remote maintenance monitoring.

We're also making planes safer, faster and more efficient all at once. It took America less than 3 score and 10 to go from a sandy beach at Kitty Hawk to set foot in the lunar Sea of Tranquillity.

We're also doing the right thing in terms of making sure things RUN right. Another reason why things are so exciting in this agency is that air traffic control corporatization may become a reality.

The President, the Secretary and the Administrator all are lobbying hard. But there are the nay-sayers. And there are those who say if it ain't broke don't fix it. And then there are those who say that general aviation will be hit with a flight-by-flight price tag that will make product liability look like a subway token,

None of these could be further from the truth.

Mr. Hinson put it best: Corporatization is an idea whose time has come. Corporatization will strip away the rules and the bureaucracy and the personnel regulations and the budget worries. Corporatization will take air traffic control -- and the professionals who support it -- and transport them free and clear of the government system that strangles productivity.

Listen to a former procurement specialist: The old way of doing things was crippling the air traffic control system with the government's own special brand of red tape.

We either change it now or be ready to accept the consequences of inflexibility.

I have heard testimony about how managers would brag when air traffic control equipment showed up only a year and a half late. I have seen the reports of the professionals who got tired of waiting [pause] so they took matters into their own hands and repaired equipment or laid carpet or gerry-rigged systems because there was no other way.

Now we know that there is another way. That way is corporatization, and from my point of view, corporatization will do as much for the aviation system as any single element of the capital investment plan [pause] and then some.

Think for a minute about what the system would look like if it operated as a business. Employee shortage in location X? Go out and hire the best. No more need to wade through a federal personnel manual that is so complex that we have to hire a legion just to INTERPRET it.

If there are equipment problems, go to the best source immediately to fix them. And if you need something to increase the flexibility of the system, there's no need to begin a process that will take months just to determine whether or not you need something. With corporatization, you look to the technology that's on the shelf and BUY it. Right now, we're in a catch 22 that has us buying and installing equipment that we know isn't the best out there. Technology is moving much faster than the process.

The point is that we've built a system that causes US to work for IT, not vice versa. We succeed and deploy the world's safest and most efficient form of transportation in spite of the hurdles in our way. Corporatization will strip away the problems, the bureaucracy. If there are hurdles, it will be because we have erected them ourselves.

Those who would fear it echo the 7 famous words of failed businesses everywhere: We never did it that way before.

And they're right: We haven't. But we need to. And we will. [pause]

I think that the battle over corporatization is far from over. In many ways, I think it's just begun. But this agency and the federal government have taken a very big step. Just getting to the point where this option could be considered is a step in the right direction.



Let me make a second point: Life in the government. The N-P-R is a much-needed push in the right direction. It's good for us, and it's good for the taxpayer.

There's no question that the National Performance Review is an indictment to those who relish the status quo. Those who dismiss the National Performance Review say it is nothing more than abject criticism delivered by those "who don't understand how things are."

I think that last comment says it all. If anything, the authors of the N-P-R know all too well "how things are." In many ways, the N-P-R report is a bitter pill. What the report says in ultimate detail is that government is way too big and way far out of hand. The things that stymie the air traffic control system are endemic to the entire ledger of federal government.

What we've stumbled into is government that commits sin after sin of rudimentary business practice. And I don't think it's too big a stretch to say that some employees who've worked under these conditions for many a year have become blind to them, if not part of them. Rather than repair a 1 dollar fuse in a microwave oven, we'll throw it away. Rather than say, "This letter looks good," we'll rewrite, retype and redo it a dozen times. Rather than listen to the technician in the field who's been saying all along, "We're going to have problems at site X because of the terrain," we just ignore the comments.

The N-P-R told us clearly that we need to do things differently. The federal government has got to leave the rules and regulations behind and start to look at situations in a common sense manner. The patient is dying, and government stands by and watches -- because the request for treatment is not filled out in triplicate. [pause]

I also think that the N-P-R is a jump start, a good start, but JUST a start. I do not think that it goes far enough. The N-P-R takes procurement reform only to the edges. I think that the report was a notice to each of us of exactly how troubled procurement really is. But I also think that it's a building block, a starting point. The N-P-R is a transition from the old way to a new way. It's a place for OTHER reforms to start.

Procurement is not the only area in which we overdo it with regulation and rule. Hiring practices. Payroll. Billing. Travel. Real estate. Research. The list goes on for pages. For those of you who have not at least GLANCED at the N-P-R, I urge you to do so. It's an eyeful.

Government is going through an evolutionary process. I think that the N-P-R is good for the F-A-A, and the things that are good for the F-A-A in general are good for the government as a whole.

The heart of the N-P-R is the notion of continuous improvement. The notion that we can stay the same, that we can accept the status quo, is dead. I don't believe that people resist change, I think that people resist change in which they don't participate. To the F-A-A's credit, management is taking steps to involve employees in decision-making. The top-down, my-way-or-the-highway style of management is fast becoming a thing of the past.

I allot myself one buzzword per speech, and here it is: empowerment. Empowerment is what we as an organization can do to allow people to do the jobs for which they've been hired. When you have a dozen layers of approval lines on a memo, chances are high that the process needs work.

An example: I saw a sole source justification recently with 29 signatures on the grid. No wonder it took 3 months to get through "the system." This is unacceptable.

From a career manager's standpoint, I can say that it's not always easy to just "let go." Like many other managers, I rose to the top by being proficient at what I do. Moving through the ranks required me to maintain proficiency.

Now, I'm in a place where quote "technical proficiency" unquote is left to someone else. I'm called upon to make decisions and let someone else do the pre-flight walk around. It still takes getting used to. I also know that it's best for the organization.

The government itself is beginning to move to the place where diversified managers are rising to the top. This is an area in which we need more work. We need to look for good managers and leaders who are generalists. I'm not sure that F-A-A actions always prove that we're headed in that direction. We need to broaden the perspectives of our managers.

Give the A-F technicians experience outside of A-F. We don't do enough cross-pollinating. Move people around. This is not advice for A-F alone. Across the board experience outside an area of expertise strengthens the entire organization in the long run. [pause]

Along the way, I've learned several lessons that have helped me personally as well as professionally. I have learned to hear AND listen. Far too many people define listening as waiting for someone else to stop talking so they can talk.

Relationships with your boss, your co-workers, your friends [pause] they all hinge on your ability to listen. A thought to keep in mind: You should be able to restate what someone else has just said. You also need to give undivided attention. Concentration is a valuable skill. It will serve you well. Good listening skills lead to credibility and consistency. [pause]

Now, I'd like to turn to my last point. The most important message I can deliver today is one of balance. Without balance in your life, your achievements, your desires, your successes and your failures all never add up to satisfaction.

I've learned this lesson the hard way.

Growing up, my idea of the perfect life was a husband, a job, a decent pay check, two kids, two cars.

That changed in a moment. Somebody asked me just the other day about my greatest success. The answer came quickly. It's raising my daughter Stephanie.

Stephanie just turned 17 recently and she's looking forward to graduation and the senior prom. She's looking at colleges and complaining about the stuff all kids complain about.

But it was just yesterday -- actually about 15 years ago -- that the doctor looked us straight in the eye and said: cystic fibrosis. What we had thought were a never-ending series of allergies or infections or colds -- the things doctors always tell you the kids will grow out of -- they were out the window.

But there was more. The doctor said, "I'm going to give it to you straight. Cystic fibrosis is fatal. We have no cure. You and your child are in for a rough ride." [pause]

Revisit the picture of that perfect household. We decided almost immediately to have no more children. Cystic fibrosis is an inherited disease, and her father and I were both carriers. Cystic fibrosis produces a thick, sticky substance that clogs the lungs and leads to fatal infections. It also obstructs the pancreas, which affects digestion and nutrition. Learning about the disease was the easy part. [pause]

A handicapped child. As a parent, watching her struggle with illness and disability has been the lesson of a lifetime. She has succeeded against the odds. She bikes, she plays, she skis.

But the picture I see in my mind's eye is of my daughter strapped to a machine that breaks up the congestion in her chest. The wish list for most kids is a bicycle or a horse. My child wants a deep breath in the worst way.



There's nothing quite so rending as the annual two week stay in the hospital when Stephanie is pumped full of the antibiotics that we hope will maintain her for the coming year.

Growth is Stephanie's gift to me. She had the choice to let this disease become her servant or her master. She has used it to make herself stronger, and I sometimes wonder if she realizes how strong she has made those around her.

I'm a single parent now, and when I face a challenge, just about any challenge, I know that there's a whole world of people out there who tackle bigger and harder each day. [pause] Sometimes with each breath.

The prognosis for cystic fibrosis is improving, but there's still no cure. All of which means that the days with my child, the young woman whom I've watched struggle, stumble but never fall, are more precious to me than anything else.

What I've learned from watching her is that life is an opportunity. We can take it and run with it. Or we can do several other things that aren't nearly as productive.

No matter what's on your plate or how you feel about what's on your plate, I encourage you to grow, to stretch. Get away from being safe. When you get in over your head, when the challenges and the risks are high, personal growth is not far behind. You'll also find yourself meeting people who will help you become established in areas outside your current job.

Balance is so important because we all are faced with a continuous stream of choices. This job, that promotion, this house, that move.

Before you choose, make sure your priorities are clear in your mind. Priorities are not cast in stone. They can change -- they DO change -- depending on the situation. Family usually comes number one. But you may have to ask them to eat tonight without you. Or you may miss a school play because you're on travel.

A while ago, I was testifying as an expert witness. I told our lawyers up front that I had to leave early that day, and they said, "No problem."

The hours rolled past, and finally I was called to speak. In the middle of the questioning, I turned to the judge and said, "Your honor, my daughter is being inducted into the national honor society. I've got exactly 45 minutes to get there, and I want to sit in the front row."

The judge gave me a puzzled look, and everyone else was shocked. But the judge said, "Can you be here tomorrow morning?" "Yes, sir." So the judge says, "You're excused." That's an extreme example, and one I wouldn't expect to get away with every time, but it shows a point rather well.

When all is said and done, my daughter won't say, "Great job on the witness stand, Mom." What she will say is, "You were there for me. Seeing you in the front row at my ceremony meant a lot."

You'll never hear committee memberships or weekends spent working or perfect view graphs mentioned in anyone's epitaph. But the words of the child who stood beside you -- whom you stood beside -- will prove an indelible legacy. Balance is knowing where you need to be and being there when you need to be.

People who have lost their focus create an agency that loses its focus. In the FAA, it happens all too often.

We attempt to serve, yet we fail to consider our reason for being. We attempt to put out the fires, yet we fail to eliminate the source of the inferno. We attempt to address the needs of each and every small bundle, yet we ignore the group as a whole.

We need only to look beyond the day-to-day problems, the letters, the telephones, the committees, and ask ourselves the big question:

Is what I'm going right now going to help a passenger at the airport in Rochester, Minnesota? Will this piece of paper, will this committee, will this memo, will this project, will this newsletter make a difference in the air transportation system that moves America?

Regrettably, it seems that the answer to each often is "No." We have traded leadership for management. We have traded productivity for process.

We have taken what we do best -- to fly safe, faster, higher, better than the rest -- and we've settled for an impenetrable bureaucratic nightmare that strangles even the greatest ideas time and time again.

The route to change lies within each of us. We need to begin providing *vital* services, and vital services only. We need to strip away the jargon and the paperwork and the meetings and the memos and start focusing on that passenger in the midwest.

Why are we here? We're here to operate and maintain a safe and efficient air transportation system. We require over 50 thousand people to do it, but we often feel that the transportation system is here to serve us, not vice versa.

The FAA needs to become streamlined. We need far less emphasis on talk and far more on action. We need to eliminate levels of management, but just compressing organizational charts is not enough.

The key question isn't, "What's the supervisory to employee ratio?" It needs to be: "Are we working on the right things?" When the answer to that question is, "Yes," horizontal integration and cross-functional cooperation become hallmarks and parochialism and waste become things of the past.

This agency is at a crossroads. We either begin to meet the needs of our customers -- the passengers, the pilots, the mechanics, the people who depend on us -- or we don't. And if we don't, if we ignore them, they'll go away. And so will we.

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