

Traveling new paths in well worn shoes

Only after becoming IPMAAC President, did it occur to me that I would have to write articles for the ACN. Though the task seemed onerous, having the opportunity to step back and ponder issues of relevance to our profession has been an enjoyable experience. This has especially been true because, in this forum, I am able to ask questions and explore issues that don't necessarily have clear cut answers. It was this line of thinking that also led to the Presidential Forum at the recent IPMAAC conference.

I was thinking about trends and recalled reading the following quote in Al Maslow's Staffing the Public Service back when I was a rookie analyst:

In the 1980's, all public employers face a contracted economy, shrinking budgets, and a huge supply of applicants. There is a real danger that agencies may be pressed to revert to policies that limit competition and that enforce arbitrary rules for qualifying and ranking applicants and for controlling who will be hired. At the same time all agencies confront demands for technical sophistication and accountability, especially in their staffing programs....These contextual factors and the ability of personnel professionals to use the array of assessment and selection procedures available to them will, in large part, determine the effectiveness of the staffing function.....There is a trend for greater status and authority to accompany greater recognition of the importance of the personnel function....provides opportunities for full professional partnership in the management team.@

It has been about twenty years since this was written and it has guided much of my career in that I have always had in my mind that there are great opportunities for our profession and that we must actively promote and defend merit principles. Over the course of time, I have seen examples of arbitrary and random processes, as well as, significant steps towards achieving that full professional partnership@.

To get a better perspective on how we are truly faring, I turned to some distinguished IPMAAC members for their thoughts and the questions of "How are we really doing in terms of becoming a true management partner?" - "What is working and what isn't?" and "What impact does this have on Merit?" became the focus of the Presidential Forum. I was fortunate and honored to have Doris Maye, from the Georgia State Merit System, Charley Sproule, recently retired from the State of Pennsylvania, Marilyn Gowing, from the US Office of Personnel Management, and Ted Darany, from Darany and Associates participate in the forum. Collectively, these wonderful people have contributed greatly to our field, represented all levels of government, founded professional organizations, and won many prestigious awards.

The panel consensus was that though there are some things that are not working well, there are many things that are and there is reason for optimism in the future. The panel also noted that though there are instances where merit is negatively impacted by new developments, it is not an automatic outcome of becoming more flexible and developing partnerships.

With regard to what isn't working, the panel noted such pitfalls as the inappropriate use of technology (there are some activities that were dumb when done manually and automation only makes the dumb thing happen faster), excessively liberal certification rules, maintaining lone size fits all@ rules, and focusing too much on minimums (qualifications, performance, etc.) rather

than on what is needed to achieve high performance.

Conversely, the panel offered a plethora of ideas for effectively becoming a management partner without sacrificing merit:

Perspective: Recognize that we can no longer count on always being the service provider of choice. There are other options and agencies are increasingly able to turn to them. If we can not deliver what is needed, our organizations will turn to someone who can, so think of service in terms of deliverables, measurable outcomes and value added. Consider how the recipients of our work would define effective assessment and focus our efforts in that direction.

Education: Educate executives and line managers on the value of assessment and provide hard evidence of this value (a fantastic example of a return on investment study conducted by the Georgia State Merit System was cited). Educate ourselves on the perspective, issues and needs of our clients.

Communication: Identify opportunities to communicate with managers and find ways to explain assessment work in terms that are meaningful to them. Find out what current language or terms are frequently used and explain assessment work in that context. We should communicate the success of our efforts to increase awareness and build credibility.

Standards: Though we must be flexible, we must recognize what is referred to in Peter Senge's The Fifth Discipline as our water line. Like a tanker ship that has a line that does not go below water level, we must have principles that we will not compromise with regard to professional standards and merit. We must be flexible in approaches and processes and can do so without sacrificing professionalism or damaging our credibility.

Skills: We must be proficient at delivering our services and apply our measurement expertise to a broader range of organizational concerns (a tremendous example of this was provided by OPM's Organizational Assessment Survey which is available via the internet at www.employeesurvey.gov).

Effective use of technology: Develop the ability to use the many new tools available to us to make our processes more efficient and more effective.

Sincerity: We must recognize that partnership is a necessity and requires a true commitment. It is more than a change in procedures, it is a different way of looking at working relationships and it is obvious to managers if there is not commitment behind the rhetoric. We must also have a true commitment to merit and constantly preach the message of the value of merit-based assessment programs.

This is just a summary of the wealth of insight that was provided by this incredible panel. As their ideas indicate, the future of our profession will lead in some new directions. By focusing on the areas noted above and staying committed to the foundations of our profession, it will undoubtedly be a successful and fulfilling journey.