



TALKING LEADERSHIP WITH **MICHEL G. VERMETTE** CEO OF APEX

Michel G. Vermette was appointed Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) in September 2015. Prior to coming to APEX, he was Deputy Commissioner, Vessel Procurement in the Canadian Coast Guard. Vermette spent much of his public service career in various parts of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, except for a few years during the 1990s when he worked for Canadian Blood Services. Craig Dowden, a regular contributor to CGE and an expert in Human Resources, interviewed Mr. Vermette recently. Vermette graduated with an MSc from the University of Ottawa and an MBA from the Ivey Business School at Western University.

Q: *Over your career, what do you think has changed the most for government executives?*

Since I first joined the Public Service, there have been fundamental changes for government executives with respect to the speed and volume of information we deal with. One example that immediately comes to mind is e-mail. During my early years, letters and memos were drafted, typed, and formatted, and ultimately made their way to the internal or external mail systems for delivery. Rapid technological innovations have increased—not only the speed with which we communicate, but also the expectations for immediate responses and turnaround. What was unthinkable then, has now become routine.

Communications also used to be very hierarchical. Today's communications do not respect hierarchies, and organizations are acting "flatter" even if they are not. Executives can sometimes be kept out of the loop, which creates a challenge for our accountabilities.

Q: *Are there certain areas or tasks where public sector executives spend far too much time?*

There is too much emphasis placed on process and reporting rather than actual outcomes and results. In 2015, APEX released a report of a May 2014 survey it conducted on the Perspectives of Public Service Executives on their Evolving Work. When execu-

tives were asked to indicate the areas of their work that were the most challenging, two key themes emerged. The first was the need to have greater authority over HR and for a more efficient staffing process. This would allow executives to focus more time on the substance of their work and reduce stress and frustration. Secondly, executives at all levels noted that they are spending more and more time dealing with the personal issues of their staff (e.g., mental health and other health issues) which, in turn, affects performance.

Q: *Are there certain areas or tasks where public sector executives should focus more attention?*

Executives need to focus on how to serve Canadians at the highest possible level. They need to ask themselves on a continuous basis how the work they are doing in the Public Service is contributing to making Canada a better place for Canadians.

Q: *Executives tend not to fare well in employee surveys. Why do you think this is the case?*

The last 2014 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) showed that generally employees were more positive about their immediate supervisor than about their senior management. This gap has grown over time. Roughly three quarters of employees expressed

favourable views of their immediate supervisor, but only about half did so with regard to their senior managers. I believe that the results about senior management are in part due to the fact that employees don't have very much contact with senior management, nor are they privy to a lot of details around certain issues and decisions. I firmly believe that more presence and more transparency would go a long way to closing this gap.

Q: *What is your favourite leadership practice?*

My personal favorite is face-to-face. This is the old "management by walking around" adapted to our reality. Make a point of getting out of your office and talking with staff, colleagues and stakeholders on a regular basis. Take the time to know the people you work with. A wise person once told me "you don't exchange business cards at the scene of the crisis." Build relationships—they will serve you well in difficult times.

Q: *What was the toughest leadership lesson you learned?*

Know thyself. I was not really conscious of the impact that my words and actions had on people around me till much later in my career. Leaders need to be self-aware.

Q: *APEX hosts induction ceremonies for incoming executives. What advice do you provide?*

There are three fundamental points I raise with new executives:

The first point is the importance of a network. Executives need to make a point of investing in, building and maintaining their networks, both inside and outside the Public Service. We all know how lonely some days can be. We all know how we need to bring new ideas forward and create space for risk and innovation. Having people you can talk to, to stimulate your thinking, to ask frank questions, to seek advice, to look for help, or simply to find out

what's happening outside one's own job, is hugely important to executives, and to their success.

The second point I make, is the need to be self-aware. Executives need to take time for introspection, for understanding themselves, their strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, motivations, and emotions. Know how others see you and how you influence others. Know how you personally can effect change, know where you draw energy from, and know what draws energy away from you. Being self-aware is something some people are born with, and something some of us work hard to develop. I believe it is fundamental to success, and to happiness. It is a primary tool for growth and development.

Third, I ask new executives to take care of others. Be empathetic, remember that you are surrounded by people who bring their whole being to work, and sometimes what we don't see is far more important than what we do. Be genuine, authentic and respectful. Take an interest in helping. Take ownership: not in the sense of being the boss, but in the sense of being responsible.

Finally, we all need to reflect on what being a professional executive means.

Q: *What are 2-3 intangible qualities you need to be a successful executive?*

I can easily think of three. The first is Adaptability. Given the constant change around us, executives need to be able to adapt to change and navigate with a positive "can do" attitude. Executives that can adapt the best to change will be the most successful. The second is integrity. Executives who anchor their decisions in a consistent set of values and who are thankful, polite and respectful when dealing with people are defined as leaders having integrity. Last but not least is Fallibility. Admitting you've made a mistake is something that every executive needs to be able to do. Experience shows that leaders who can readily admit their mistakes are more relatable and are more trustworthy to employees. ☺

The annual APEX Symposium, which is the largest gathering of federal executives of the Canadian Public Service, is being held at the Shaw Centre in Ottawa May 31 and June 1, 2016. This year's program is aligned with the new Key Leadership Competencies and the new commitments in executive Performance Agreements. The President of the Treasury Board and the Clerk of the Privy Council will speak. Keynote speakers recognized as global leaders in their areas of expertise will include: Rohinton Medhora, President of the Centre for International Governance Innovation, Vijay Govindarajan the innovation guru and business professor from Tufts and Harvard, Bill Wilkerson of Mental Health International and the Honourable Michael Wilson, Chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The concurrent sessions feature practitioners who will address workplace issues around health and wellbeing, policy innovation and collaboration, and leadership gaps.