

Remarks by Max Stier

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The following is an edited transcript of a conversation between Max Stier, President and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, and David Ullrich, with questions from EPA Alumni Association members and other attendees. The transcript has been lightly edited for readability.

DAVID ULLRICH

[0:00]

Thank you very much for joining us. Max had a big award ceremony last night, a board meeting this morning, and a son coming home from college tonight — yet he found time, and made time, in his very busy schedule to be with us tonight to tell us a little bit about the Partnership for Public Service and what's going on with public service these days. Max, thank you. Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about the Partnership for Public Service?

MAX STIER

[0:29]

Happy to do so. The best way — you said it earlier about what you found most valuable at EPA: the people. So I'd be remiss not to introduce my colleagues Georgia and Natalie, who are here and working on our effort to create connectivity among alumni groups and former feds, in particular. Please introduce yourselves to them. I'm also very pleased to see one of my former colleagues here, Rodney, who is at EPN and was a great talent there — glad to see him staying in the fold and helping federal employees. Can I ask — how many people have heard of the Partnership for Public Service? Show of hands. There we go!

So I started it 25 years ago. The basic concept was this: there are 1.5 million nonprofits, all focused on very important public-interest issues, but none of them focused on trying to make our government work better to deliver on any of those policy interests. So the concept was that we needed to think about the actual institutional, operational capacity of our country. We have one tool for collective action as a society that has the primacy of the public and taxpayer resources behind it — and that is our government. That was the general idea of the organization, and it's been quite the journey since.

We do things like the Service to America Medals — the Sammys program. The theory is very simple: the public needs to know more about what public servants do, and public servants themselves need a culture of recognition. No organization gets better if all you do is kick it. We have a lot of institutional capacity designed to find problems, but not answers — and that's not good design. We need to rebalance and find ways to surface the good work that people are doing, work that actually provides answers to the problems.

DAVID ULLRICH

[2:37]

Very good. So you've told us a little bit about the Partnership, and you've been there since the very beginning. What drew you to that, and what were some of the early challenges? How have you seen things grow?

MAX STIER

[2:51]

I'm a big believer in not planning my life. I think you create the best opportunity by doing what's right now. The future is super unpredictable, so do what's right now and you'll create future choices. I did not intend to start the Partnership.

My career has always been around government, mainly because the most interesting opportunities were in government. When I left the Department of Housing and Urban Development — my last government job — I didn't know what I wanted to do. I went out and spoke to about 80 people in three weeks, each one referring me on, and I met a gentleman who was concerned about the quality and nature of talent coming into government. He said, 'I'll commit \$25 million to you if you start a nonprofit.' I thought: sounds good. And I was off and running.

His concern was originally getting talent in. I very quickly realized that was only one piece of the challenge, because if you don't have a well-managed organization, you can push as much talent into it as you want and you'll lose it right away. So our history as an organization has been largely about understanding that the ecosystem was more and more complex.

We began with questions of talent management — really HR issues. We realized that's not actually what's at play: it's a leadership issue. HR supports leaders, but leaders are responsible for making sure the right talent is brought in and managed effectively. We were focused on the career civil service, then realized the political appointees were fundamental to the system. We began doing transition work and a whole training regimen for them. We then realized: it's not just the executive branch — it's Congress. And then: it's not just inside government, it's the American public's understanding of government. You need both trustworthy government and trusted government.

The latest iteration for us is: yes, federal government, but also state and local. We've launched a whole effort at the state and local level. In California we've launched a transition project to help the gubernatorial transition currently underway, and we're doing leadership development and talent pipeline work there. We've also got an AI leadership development program that 48 states have participated in over the past year. This is all part of the organizational pivot we've made.

DAVID ULLRICH

[5:39]

It sounds like you haven't had any trouble staying busy. Setting aside the current period of time, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced earlier in the lifetime of the Partnership for Public Service?

MAX STIER

[5:59]

This is a good moment to talk about that, because I just had my board meeting today. I'm a lawyer by training and did not come to nonprofit management naturally. As I mentioned, the gentleman I met 25-plus years ago offered \$25 million and told me I'd never have to worry about money — and then he died. So I quickly learned that as a nonprofit leader, my primary job was actually raising money. The ideas were relatively straightforward; the execution was challenging; and the resources were profoundly difficult. It's a double bottom line: you have a mission, yes, but you aren't going anywhere if you don't have the money to hire the team and support the effort.

That has been by far and away the greatest challenge — creating a field of giving, because it doesn't come naturally to people to give money to an organization trying to help our government. We've spent over 20 years really growing understanding in the philanthropic community that this matters. This past year has been an interesting moment for that as well.

A second challenge is that leaders in our government don't really think about or care about management. That's a massive challenge. Really trying to figure out how you engage the people in charge to actually mind the store they were hired to mind — and it's not just them. It's leaders across our entire society. They typically engage with government around their policy interests and not around the institutional capacity fundamental to making policy real.

A third challenge is people management itself — there is no more important or more difficult challenge than working with people to get them to work collectively and effectively, especially in resource-constrained environments. The list goes on from there, but you can keep me here long enough and I can give you more.

DAVID ULLRICH

[8:23]

Your venture into the nonprofit world reminds me of when I moved from government to nonprofit. Richard M. Daley, the mayor of Chicago, didn't offer \$25 million — he said, 'This is what I want you to do: figure it out, or I'll find somebody else.' That was one management technique.

MAX STIER

[8:42]

One management technique — and pretty effective for running a city.

DAVID ULLRICH

[8:55]

Looking back, what do you consider the biggest success the Partnership has had over these years?

MAX STIER

[8:55]

The easy answer is the Partnership itself — an organization filled with extraordinary people. It's like the proverbial 'teach a person to fish': the organization produces all sorts of immense value. Last night is a great example: an incredible celebration of public servants in a very difficult environment, put together by a set of colleagues who didn't ask for my input and did an amazing job. The organization can achieve things that no individual can.

I do think the transition work is incredibly important. It's something that has fallen through the cracks — no one has owned it — and how an administration starts is fundamental to its ability to succeed. The relationship between a new political team and the career workforce is something we've done a lot of work to improve, and that has big consequences.

The Best Places to Work rankings have likewise been a game changer. Political leaders, in particular, have been able to hide from the impact they have had as a managerial class on their organizations, because there was no real-time data to judge performance. That I think has been vital.

Our leadership model — we've developed a model about what leading in the public sector should look like, and it begins fundamentally with the idea that you're a steward of the public good. Every individual in this room understands that, and none of the leaders of this current administration do, and that's a problem. Having a leadership model, a north star, is truly fundamental. The state of California is about to adopt the model for the entire state. That's very powerful.

What is amazing to me is that there's nothing more impactful to the state of our society than the quality and capability of our government to produce for the American people — and it receives so little attention. I'm hoping we can shift quickly to what we can do about this, because it's easy to get lost in the problem, and the real value comes from what we can do to make things better, which I know is what is in everyone's heart here.

DAVID ULLRICH

[11:59]

I'm wondering if you could comment — maybe briefly — on the current status of public service, but maybe even more importantly, what you see for the future.

MAX STIER

[12:11]

'Briefly' might be a challenge, but I will do my best. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know, but the metaphor for me is this: our government has suffered from rust for decades, and now we have an administration that's taken a sledgehammer to it. Rust is not good. A sledgehammer is a lot worse.

You can count the people who were fired or constructively fired: 388,000. You can look at the morale numbers — 7.5% of the workforce saying their leaders engender high degrees of motivation; almost 80% saying they cannot raise a violation of law without fear of retaliation. These are devastating indictments on the management of our government today, and the public needs to understand it.

Not to admire the problem, but to say what we can do about it: our theory of change is simple. We need to do everything we can to stop the harm, and everything we can to build a better future. Two parts, and they're related.

To stop the harm: first and foremost, we try to take care of the people who are still there — provide them answers to the questions they have and the support they need, give them a sense of community so they know they're not alone. We're creating robust alumni organizations at the individual agency level, and really activating the former federal workforce broadly. Our government largely operates in vertical silos — that's actually a problem programmatically, and it's a problem for making sure the federal voice is more powerful. We need to operate more as an enterprise, to collaborate and coordinate across the entire architecture of government.

We also need to not just design a plan for what comes next, but create the conditions for success — focused on the plan actually being implemented, not just designed. Part of that is going to have to deal with some very tricky issues: how do you deal with the anger? With another political team wanting to come in and get retribution? With an existing workforce that may have been selected for reasons that are not merit-driven? These are complex questions.

Even more important, in my view, is how we take advantage of the moment to challenge the things that aren't working the way that we should want them to work. That's not an indictment of the past — it's a recognition that the world is changing, and our government has not kept up. There are going to be forces like AI that are new, and things we could have and should have done earlier that we haven't. The reform comes back to this notion of what leadership should look like — the commitment to the public good — and we have to question the very nature of the leadership model itself. We not only have 4,000 political appointees, but there are no job qualifications for them, no performance plans (this administration just got rid of performance plans for Schedule C's), and no evaluation process. That's my brief — and brief.

DAVID ULLRICH

[15:49]

For some of the people who have left federal service recently, we are hearing that there have been difficulties obtaining retirement benefits. We have heard about it from EPA people who have left and from other federal retirees. Have you heard anything about that? Do you have any advice on what we might be able to do as an organization to help?

MAX STIER

[16:25]

I have heard that consistently across the board. Unfortunately, that could have been anticipated — you don't strip out 388,000 employees in a non-strategic way and not expect substantial operational challenges in the organizations that remain. Morale has been devastated, and there will not be a prioritization of dealing with this.

So the more important question is: what can you do about it? Collect data. Tell stories. Create a political cost for their failure to take care of people. We are in an information war right now. There is a battle over narrative, and we need to understand that and fight it effectively.

We live in a society where the American people have fundamentally not understood who their government is. There's a wonderful book that Michael Lewis and a number of other writers contributed to — the paperback came out two days ago, with a chapter from us in it — called 'Who Is Government.' We've been doing research on this for nearly seven years. Most Americans, if you ask them who the federal government is, say bickering politicians in Washington. They don't think about the people in this room, or

the people helping them in their community.

In the last couple of days we got new survey data showing a 10-point jump — to 61% — in the share of Americans who believe civil servants are working for people like them, with only 27% saying negatively. The number of folks who say civil servants are competent went up to 65%, another over-10-point jump. This is the moment to reintroduce the civil service to the American people. And it has to be about them, not us.

There are a lot of bad things that have happened to federal employees. We need to translate that into: 'This is why it is bad for you' — not just bad for the federal employee. And you need to get it out in the right channels. You said there are 3,200 members of this organization and 81,000-plus years of experience. I would ask not how many years of experience, but how many people do those 3,200 people know? What are their social networks, and where can they communicate this? Because the way to reach center-right or low-information Americans is by telling them stories and going through different channels than mainstream media. We've had maybe 20,000 stories in mainstream media about our work. Our focus now is on social media influencers and trusted messengers. Those 3,200 people are probably members of churches, veterans' service organizations, all sorts of other networks — and they need to be activated to communicate this information if we want to reach people who need to hear it.

DAVID ULLRICH

[20:21]

Max, you obviously know a great deal about public service in the United States. Have you had an opportunity to look at models in other countries that we might learn from?

MAX STIER

[20:43]

I love the question, and I would say other countries and other jurisdictions inside the United States. One of the things we do a lousy job of in the public sector is best-practice analysis.

I will say this, and people push back immediately, but one of my favorite things I've done in this job is spend about four days in Singapore and really dig deep into their system. Tomorrow morning — at 7:30, unfortunately, which is 12 hours difference — I have a call with their head of technology, who used to be chief of staff to the Prime Minister. They do it right. You can make arguments: it's not a democracy, it's small, whatever. I don't care. The reality is what they do in government is phenomenal. They have an enterprise perspective; they move their talent around, which I think is fundamental to that perspective; they value and educate public servants. It's a vastly different model, and we should be learning from them. There are a bunch of other countries frankly way ahead of us in how they manage their public sector.

We're doing work in California. They have a nifty platform called Engage California — an interesting model for thinking about the federal government. They deployed it first inside the California state government as a way for state employees to surface their ideas about how things should be managed. There's a lot of learning for us to do. We're trying to set up an advisory group that pulls on expertise from other places, because now's the moment.

DAVID ULLRICH

[23:06]

I'm going to ask one more question, and then we'll open it to the audience. Peter Murchie will be the leadoff questioner from the Environmental Protection Network. But the last question from me, Max — you've informed us a great deal about public service and the Partnership. What advice would you provide to young people considering a future in public service?

MAX STIER

[23:47]

I want to offer a challenge to what I think is a fundamental framing issue here. When I started the Partnership, the gentleman who gave the \$25 million was very concerned about getting young people into government, and we did the normal intuitive thing: we created a whole network of universities to raise the profile of government service and get more young people involved. What I have learned in 25 years is that is not actually what we need to do.

The real challenge of getting young people into our government starts with the fact that there's no demand signal from government itself. Unless and until leaders in our government say 'this is our priority' and make the investment to make it happen, you can excite as many young people as you want — it's the proverbial pushing on a string.

Four things have to happen: First, we need leaders who actually care about and prioritize getting young people into government. Second, we need managers who will retain the young people that do come — managers specially capable of providing work environments that excite and interest them. Third, we need processes that will assess and recruit them effectively. A big part of that is the most basic thing: student internship programs. Every other sector uses internships as the primary means of bringing young people in. When I was at the Justice Department, we started a paralegal program that any law firm would say 'well, of course — that's how you do it.' We started it in the Antitrust Division about 26 years ago; it has now spread to half the components of our government. Piloting doesn't work in the federal government — the scaling question is much more fundamental. And fourth, you need excited talent — but you can't just start with the last thing, or you won't go very far.

So what should we be telling young people? The reality is that there are already more young people who want to come into government than we're taking advantage of. I would focus energy and effort on explaining to the American people why they should care about the nature of their government — why what is happening right now is bad, and why there is a better path, a way to create a more responsive government that will answer their concerns much better than they're experiencing today. That's where the most important energy needs to go.

DAVID ULLRICH

[27:13]

Excellent, Max. Let's take just a moment before we go to questions — let's give Max a round of applause for this outstanding presentation and excellent insight.

MAX STIER

[27:32]

I think you are the one who deserves the applause, for the 50-plus years of leadership of this organization. What you're doing here as a volunteer organization — we need this. This is the moment. Don't let this guy go.

DAVID ULLRICH

[27:47]

Speaking of interns — this young fellow came out to Chicago as a Presidential Management Intern and I took him out and ran him around the lakefront a few times, and here he is, now a big shot at the Environmental Protection Network. Peter Murchie has the opening question from the audience.

PETER MURCHIE

[28:07]

First, we need to recognize you, Dave. I was an intern and you mentored me because you were also a servant leader — a great model for everyone who worked with you, and now at the Environmental Protection Network Alumni Association. I'm Peter Murchie with the Environmental Protection Network.

Max, what you laid out is amazing. The network everyone here has is really important. One of the things we've been doing with the Alumni Association is partnering, building relationships, supporting folks who are still there, supporting folks who left, and bringing them in so they know they have a community. That is one of the most valuable things EPN and the Alumni Association are doing together — it creates a space for activity, whether mentoring formally or informally, or going out and telling the story as an authentic messenger.

My question: we're two organizations growing our programs to support civil service and civil servants. In this collective enterprise space you're describing, are there opportunities we're maybe not taking advantage of? What are others doing that we should pay attention to and get involved in?

MAX STIER

[29:45]

It's a wonderful question, and I think we should all be doing our very best to learn and adjust. This is an unprecedented world we're in — anyone who says 'here is the formula' is wrong. There are some clear objectives, but how we get there isn't easy.

You're already part of something we've tried to create: a learning community of the different alumni groups. Your work as a broader EPA community is more mature than most other agencies. I shouldn't speculate as to why, but EPA has been on the front lines of challenge for a long time.

I don't actually have a clean answer of 'here are the three things you should do' — other than to talk to Georgia, and to learn with us and help us. There is no Yellow Pages for all the different alumni groups. We are surfacing them through word of mouth and personal relationships. Helping us find who else is out there is invaluable. There are a lot of new groups setting up — for example, there's a national security alumni group from the Department of Justice that came together because, like everyone else, they're getting crushed, and I only know about it because I happen to know the person who runs it. So helping us collectively identify who else is out there and bringing them together is critical.

We hope to create toolkits so we can have more formalized learning. We're doing work training people to go to the Hill — and there's probably more power if we create a shared agenda: here are the three things we want, rather than having 12 different groups going up desperately asking for different things. It's really about collective action and mobilizing the tools of influence we have.

There's also a great need around storytelling. EPA has a footprint across the entire country, and the DC stuff is not what communicates to the public we need to reach. Getting stories from communities across the country is going to be important.

BRUCE DIAMOND

[33:06]

We assume the future EPA is never going to look like the old EPA, because we've lost an awful lot of expertise over the last year or so. How do we go about envisioning a new EPA? The same question could be asked about other technically oriented agencies.

MAX STIER

[33:32]

We are involved in a project we're calling 'Government for a New Era' — honestly our organizational priority right now — and we're trying to answer that question over time. We do not have a lot of time, as I noted earlier.

It's ultimately not about developing simply a plan; it's about creating the conditions for success. The most important condition is a public that cares — so the narrative battle is fundamental. Then comes actually getting the plan adopted and executed, which requires congressional support, candidates on the campaign trail making commitments, and access to the talent we're ultimately going to need.

We also have to think about other models. And bluntly, we're entering a world where AI is going to change the necessary footprint for organizations to deliver. I grew up in a world — we all did — where we succeeded on the fact that intelligence was scarce. AI creates a world in which intelligence is abundant. Managing that is going to be really challenging and will create disruptions that may be deeply problematic for our society, but it also presents an opportunity to think about how we can rebuild government in a different way.

Whatever world we're going into, I'm hoping it's one where we reestablish the primacy of the public good as the purpose of our government and a nonpartisan, expert civil service as the primary instrument of achieving that. But the resource base is not going to be what it has been historically, and we'll be required to think differently about how we get the outcomes we want. Part of that is making government much more customer-centered — and perceived as customer-centered. Part of it is figuring out what internal processes are counterproductive, unnecessary, and can be eliminated. And it's going to start with really capable leaders who do not need to be subject matter experts, but who are effective organizational change leaders. We'll also need to rethink the relationship across agencies — I'm not a big believer in physical reorganization, which always becomes an immense distraction. How do we create the efficiency, connectivity, and culture that doesn't require moving around the boxes? It's not a complete answer, but those are some broader thoughts.

DAVID ULLRICH

[37:19]

Very good thoughts. Questions now from the chat with the virtual community.

VIRTUAL PARTICIPANT

[37:37]

[Question read aloud] Require national service — many young folks are just disenchanted. I'm thinking U.S. combined military or civic service; think AmeriCorps. Would be fantastic between high school and college.

MAX STIER

[37:55]

The question is about national service as a possibility for addressing some of the issues we have as a society. I've been involved in national service conversations since I was about 16 years old — I was part of a Ford Foundation National Commission as the student representative — and I've pretty much had the same thought since then, which is: we're barking up the wrong tree.

It's a powerful concept without the resources our society is ever going to commit to doing it at the scale people have been talking about. With one caveat: I think we should focus on places where there are already resource commitments where you can activate young people. The public sector is one of those — there are lots of jobs, and we need more young people in them.

Here's my idea — and I'm plugging this in every corner I can. I actually think there's a window of possibility for getting the AI companies — whose work is going to displace a ton of entry-level jobs — to invest today in providing service opportunities for the cohort of people their technology is going to displace. It meets their very real brand problem as companies. I'm sort of quietly working on that. It's a super long shot, but I think it's the right thing for them and for our society.

Honestly, in my view, I would not be spending a lot of energy on big-sky national service. It's been a conversation we've had for decades and it hasn't gone anywhere — and we have much bigger problems to actually tackle right now.

BRUCE DIAMOND

[40:22]

Recently there have been many changes in the rules governing the civil service — not very good ones — and more may be coming. What changes do you think may be good, and which are harmful? What are the things going on these days that are really harming civil service, and what ideas can be put forward that would really benefit it?

MAX STIER

[40:49]

I'm hoping to put out a piece on this next week — I write for The Contrarian, and I get this version of the question regularly.

This administration — especially OPM — has adopted some number of the reforms we have pushed for for a long time: things like challenging degree requirements, focusing on recruiting young and more tech-savvy talent. But the context is missing. You can't recruit new young people into an organization with

deep morale problems and expect to do yourself any good. All you're doing is chasing that talent away once — if — you ever get them to arrive. We had the PMF program, the PMI program, 18F, USDS — all stopped. You've got to recognize the context we're operating in.

In principle, some of what they're reforming are good ideas, but without the context, they're not. It's also worrisome that they're going backwards on things like performance plans — even a process-only plan is better than none. To be a realist: I don't think this administration, in its current incarnation, is doing anything that is actually good. It starts with the fact that they don't respect the civil service, its purpose, or the fact that being nonpartisan and expert is core to its DNA. You have to have that before any of these changes really matter. The hiring changes they've made are enabling them to hire loyalists rather than the nonpartisan, merit-based people we need. We need people speaking up about this and explaining why it matters, so it's not an inside-baseball abstract proposition.

DAVID ULLRICH

[43:45]

One last question, I hope — a brief one.

MAX STIER

[43:48]

My problem is the answering.

BOB WAYLAND [VIA CHAT]

[43:52]

[Question read aloud] The association's half-century of progress project does a good job of capturing major accomplishments and acknowledges remaining challenges, completed for the 2020/50th anniversary. Much of it could still be timely. Could we make further outreach with these reports as a foundation? One high school in Georgia has asked me to teach based on the water report eight times in the last six years.

MAX STIER

[44:25]

Yes — anything you can repurpose is faster than building something new. That's true in government as well. We are much better off repurposing existing infrastructure than trying to create something brand new.

If you produce something that helps explain why EPA has changed lives, figure out how to slap a new coat of paint on it and bring it back. But remember — I've been doing the Sammys for 25 years. The starting point is: what has been the impact for some particular constituency outside of government, for the American people? And how do you explain your work in those terms? That, to me, is absolutely vital — and ideally it's not just data, it has a story affiliated with it: people in their community, etc.

Thank you all. I'm going to go see my son, who hopefully is home now and may or may not want to see me — but that's a different proposition.

DAVID ULLRICH

[45:52]

Max, thank you so much.

Transcript generated by Otter.ai; edited by the EPA Alumni Association.