

# The Business of Government

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S KEYBOARD 1

### 2000 Presidential Transition 2

*Memos to the President*

Deploying Technology and Changing Culture

Changing Results by Changing Behavior

The President's Management Council

Transforming Organizations

### Profiles in Leadership

## INTRODUCTION 15

### CONVERSATIONS 16

Melissa J. Allen, Gene L. Dodaro, James J. Flyzik, Dr. Thomas L.

Garthwaite, Janice R. Lachance, and Jacquelyn L. Williams-Bridgers

### Research Abstracts 40

Transforming Government.....40

Managing Telecommuting in the Federal Government.....42

Using Virtual Teams to Manage Complex Projects.....44

The Auction Model .....46

### The Endowment 49

Recent Grant Award Winners

by Paul Lawrence



As the new administration comes to town, there will be a natural tendency to jump on the e-government bandwagon. While e-government is important and there is much that can be done to improve the delivery of services to the American people via the Internet, I want to use this opportunity to provide a cautionary tale to the new administration. While e-government is neat and offers a world of opportunity, high-tech, low-touch is not the total answer to improving customer satisfaction among the American public.

We learned long ago that individuals who come in contact with both the public and private sectors still value personal touch and personal relationships. I hope the new administration will not forget that government exists to help its citizens, often in times of need or under stress. The new administration's success will be measured and remembered by how government fulfills these needs. These interactions are successes or failures because of the people involved. To see customer service done in a highly professional, effective manner, I urge members of the new administration to take a break from transition meetings to visit Arlington National Cemetery.

My suggestion is based on personal experience. My father, a career Army officer and decorated Korean and Vietnam War veteran, died this spring after a long illness. Amidst the trauma and emotion, my 75-year-old mother had to decide how and where my father would be buried. She quickly dismissed a government funeral, as she lacked the energy and time to deal with what she perceived as "all the hassles."

As we began to search for alternatives, I got a call from my pastor, a retired Marine Corps officer, who urged me to rethink a military funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. Countering my concerns, he told me, "It's the best run operation in Washington." With this recommendation, my mother reluctantly agreed to call. Still her expectations were low, as she imagined that with so many high-ranking dignitaries in the DC area, he might not be offered a plot in Arlington.

My mother's call to Arlington Cemetery was answered quickly and professionally. The person was sympathetic and, within a few minutes, established that, yes, my father was eligible to be buried in Arlington. Since we live in the area, the representative suggested that a person-to-person meeting would be most effective to discuss logistics and then scheduled the meeting.

At that meeting, we learned that the cemetery is run by the Army and that while space is at a premium, there is still room for people like my father. The types of services provided were explained and referrals were provided for anything that they did not do. Because she had chosen a Catholic service, my mother was given a list of choices she needed to make.

As a result of this short meeting, my mother went from government skeptic to an outright fan. More importantly, her mood began to change from one of completing a difficult task to enjoying the process of honoring my father (language she picked up from the cemetery representative who worked with us). Every subsequent interaction we had with the staff of the cemetery was the same — attentive, precise, and understanding.

On the day of the funeral, everything went exactly as they said it would. The church service began and ended on time. My father's casket was pulled by well-groomed horses through the cemetery, followed by a large military band, playing appropriate music, marching sharply. From a personal perspective, it was a moving tribute. More objectively, what I was a part of that day was the crisp delivery of a government service, under trying circumstances, that far exceeded any measure of customer satisfaction.

A week later my mother received a nice note from the head of the organization responsible for funeral services at the cemetery. In it, he asked five questions about how they had done, so that they might improve. Giving the highest score in each category still seemed less than this impressive performance deserved.

Based on this personal experience, I would like to share the following insights with the new administration. First, no websites were involved in this transaction. Technology is great, but people and the personal touch still play an important role in the delivery of government services. Second, the people at Arlington National Cemetery clearly understood their customers and their service. The activities of literally hundreds of people had been planned and executed with our needs in mind. Third, service provided by government is personal. Even though they conduct as many as 30 burials a day, for our two hours, it felt as though my father was the most important person ever to serve in the Army.

Epilogue: Five days later, I visited my father's grave. I intentionally went into the main building and asked how I find a plot, trying to imagine how those who couldn't attend the funeral would fare. Within three minutes I was given the exact location, a map, and detailed directions.

It used to be that "good enough for government work" was a compliment, indicating the high standards that needed to be met. At Arlington National Cemetery, they are still doing that kind of "government work." Wouldn't it be rewarding if the new administration's legacy were to return the original meaning to this expression? ■

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