

BOX 1.3

REFLECTIONS OF A PUBLIC SERVICE JUNKIE

In reviewing my own motivations for staying in public service, I found several, rather than one single answer.

First, there is a joy in the use of skills learned through a long apprenticeship. After twenty years in public service, I realize my skills and abilities were not easily or painlessly acquired. My education in public service has been costly, and I feel an obligation to repay the resources, energy, and interest others have invested in teaching me.

A second factor is the conviction that the work is important. There is an underlying assumption in public service that we are all part of an effort that leads to a better life for individuals in our society. Public service is ultimately based on the view that the human condition can be improved, an optimism which perhaps forms the core of the motivation for staying in public service. In order to remain in government, you have to believe that your actions can have some small impact on the public good.

Only in public service can you find the sense of completion that comes from working on a successful program to reduce infant mortality, for example, and then realizing that thirty-five more children are alive this year as a result of that effort. Only in public service can you participate in a process that helps move individuals from mental hospitals back into the community. The opportunity to help solve a community problem and then to witness the changes that occur is the cement that binds us to public service.

A final motivation for public service is the importance of constantly reaffirming the legitimacy and credibility of government services in the public's mind. One vital way to reaffirm our ability to govern ourselves, to control our own fate, is to have government, at all levels, that delivers the services expected of it. This presupposes a cadre of individuals who can understand and manage public institutions. If there is no response when the public demands action, then it confirms our sense of alienation and powerlessness, and we lose our ability to cooperate. If, as public servants, we are rusty, run-down, obsolete tools of government, then there will only be further reaction against the institution of government. The challenge is to be there whether or not we are wanted, to be committed to the public's business whether or not we are noticed, to carry the public trust whether or not we are asked, and to pick up the garbage.

In the end, regardless of the personal reasons to stay in public service, the process of government demands dedicated professionals to make it work. The ability to continue day-to-day government operations in the face of all difficulties is what public service is about. That ability is what creates a legitimate government, what creates the public trust. If that is too abstract, then let us say that public service is about babies living, fires being extinguished, garbage collected, crimes solved, people moved. That is all there is, ever.

SOURCE: Thomas Downs, "Reflections of a Public Service Junkie." Reprinted with permission from the March 1988 issue of *Public Management (PM)* magazine, published by the International City/County Management Association, Washington, D.C. (Tom Downs has served several communities as city manager and also served as the president of Amtrak.)