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HOME > DMV OPERATIONS > RIGHT ON SCHEDULE

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AUGUST 2017

HOW MOTOR VEHICLE AGENCY LEADERS SHOULDER THE BURDENS OF OFFICE

BY MATT ALDERTON

Photo by Darren Carroll

Public officials often mention the “call to serve.” For some, it’s like the sound of a vintage telephone ringing urgently in their ear. For others, it’s more like the sensation of a smartphone vibrating ever so gently in their handbag. No matter how loud or soft its ring, however, those born to serve always answer the call when it comes.

Whitney Brewster was just 8 years old when her call came. “One night I was lying in bed thinking about who it was that I wanted to be when I grew up,” recalls Brewster, executive director of the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles. “I thought, ‘Well, I could be a teacher.’”

She quickly thought better of that, however, as she wanted to influence people on a mass scale versus two- or three-dozen students at a time. She may have been small, but she was thinking big.

“I don’t know where it came from—I did not come from a political family—but I wanted to serve as many people as possible,” Brewster continues. “So I thought, ‘I’ll become a politician.’”

Despite her resolve, Brewster never did become a politician. Because on her way to elected office, she discovered another, equally powerful vehicle in which to serve: government administration.

“I realized it wasn’t necessary to run for office to be able to serve people in the way I’d envisioned as an 8-year-old girl,” says Brewster, a Texas native who began her government career in Alaska working for the state legislature and ultimately was named director of the Alaska Division of Motor Vehicles.

It was the first of many lessons Brewster learned about leadership: Leaders need to be flexible, because things rarely go as planned. Now at the pinnacle of her public-service pilgrimage, she’s one of four senior motor vehicle administrators who joined *MOVE* in reflecting on the wisdom they’ve accumulated during their careers. Although each has had his or her own trajectory, opportunities and challenges, all share the same satisfaction at having found a higher purpose. They heard the call, they answered it, and now they’re forwarding it to future leaders who are waiting as eagerly by the phone as they once were.

THE PATH TO LEADERSHIP

There is no single road that leads to the top of a government agency. Rather, there are many.

Like Brewster, Ray Martinez got there by way of working for a state legislature, where he commenced a career that has encompassed positions in both state and federal government, including the White House; the New York State Attorney General; and the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, where he was commissioner. What he says prepared him most for his current position, however, was law school.

“Being an attorney helps me deal with all the legislative issues that are presented to my office on an almost daily basis,” says Martinez, now chairman and chief administrator of the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission. “Things can get bumpy. Sometimes we have to fight back on bills that might undercut our authority, or help legislators understand how their proposals might be problematic ... My training as a lawyer helps me ask good questions and make compelling arguments.”



New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission Chairman and Chief Administrator Ray Martinez meets with his executive team.

2016–2017 AAMVA Chair of the Board Jean Shiimoto brings a different skill set to her role as director of the California Department of Motor Vehicles. An accountant by trade, she began as an auditor at the California Department of Developmental Services and subsequently worked her way up through the finance departments of several state agencies. “For me, [finance] was a great place to come from,” says Shiimoto, who joined the California DMV as a financial systems manager in 1988 and later climbed the ladder to become the CFO at DMV. “That financial background brings a lot to the table ... Doing the budget, for example, helps you learn a lot about the department and its different programs and divisions. And because you understand the numbers, you can really hit the ground running.”

Roger Grove transferred to government from the private sector, where he was a fraud investigator and then a regional customer service manager. “Working in the private sector had a lot to do with me becoming a leader,” explains Grove, executive director of the Motor Vehicles and Registries Administration in Alberta, Canada. The private sector, he says, taught him pioneering business approaches



Roger Grove, executive director of Motor Vehicles and Registries Administration in Alberta, Canada, is pictured with a group of the agency's motor vehicle specialists.

like Six Sigma before most government personnel had even heard of them. “The principles I learned in private business help me to ask the questions to challenge the processes. ‘Doing business the way we have always done it’ doesn’t sit well with me; we owe it to our organizations and our citizens to make process improvements.”

Whatever path one takes to public sector seniority, someone else has already trod it. With that in mind, leaders say junior staff who wish to reach the top of their profession should observe their managers and make themselves an asset; if they do, leaders who rise will take them with.

“Remember,” Shiimoto advises, “you don’t pick your bosses; they pick you.”

REWARDS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

For those with a servant’s heart, all public service is rewarding. There’s something particularly special, however, about leading a DMV, according to Martinez. “If you took a directory of state agencies in any state, half the people who looked at it wouldn’t have any idea what many of those state agencies do,” he says. “Many of those state agencies don’t deal directly with the public. We do.”

Even if some personnel at the motor vehicle agencies didn’t interface directly with citizens, their missions still would. “Oftentimes DMVs are seen as being administrative; I think that’s very much a short change of DMVs,” notes Brewster, who says the regulations and policies DMVs create and enforce keep roads safe, vehicles secure and commerce flowing, while also generating revenue to support other beloved government services. DMVs don’t just push paper; they also save lives and livelihoods.

“I feel a very different level of responsibility leading a motor vehicle agency,” Grove echoes. “It’s kind of humbling; I have the ability to impact people directly and make life better for the more than 3 million Albertans who use our services.”

Of course, with great rewards come great challenges. Among the most obvious, for example, are fiscal limitations, which perpetually challenge DMVs to achieve more impact with fewer resources. “Budgetary and staffing constraints that all state departments have ... [are] one of the biggest challenges for everyone,” Martinez says.

Another challenge is scale: Their missions are so diverse, their footprints so large and their stakeholders so numerous that DMVs typically can’t please everyone. “There are so many different interests to consider that have a direct impact on motor vehicles and the services we provide, and they all have competing goals,” Grove says of motor vehicle agencies, whose stakeholders typically include motorists, commercial trucking companies, provincial and federal lawmakers, law enforcement and DMV employees, among others. “It can be challenging to prioritize things to meet the needs of everyone.”

For Brewster, motor vehicle agencies’ biggest benefit—their impact on citizens—is also their greatest hurdle. “The biggest challenge is when you have to make decisions that will impact people’s livelihoods,” she says, noting that regulations can sometimes have unintended consequences on citizens and businesses whose income relies directly or indirectly on motor vehicles.

WHAT IT TAKES TO LEAD

In order to solve the challenges they’ll face as leaders, young DMV administrators must cultivate and develop several important skills.

Because motor vehicle agencies must work with numerous stakeholders to get things done, one of the most important competencies is collaboration, according to Shiimoto, who says her greatest accomplishments are the product of strong coalitions. California passed progressive autonomous vehicle laws in 2012, for instance, and the California DMV successfully engaged automakers, federal partners and other state agencies in a discussion about the future of transportation.



California Department of Motor Vehicles Director Jean Shiimoto is pictured with a group of her deputy directors.

“It’s very important to have relationships, and to do that, you have to build respect and earn each other’s trust,” Shiimoto says. “You have to understand how customers and other entities do business so you can collaborate to put forth the best policies and procedures.”

Collaboration also breeds buy-in, according to Brewster, who often invites key stakeholders to co-create policy with the Texas DMV. Doing so, she says, turns detractors into supporters, which makes it easier to implement new policies in a way that reflects positively on both the agency and its leadership.

A close cousin to collaboration is empathy, according to Martinez, who cites as one of his biggest achievements “Skip the Trip,” a program created to let citizens renew their driver’s license by mail every other renewal cycle in response to public frustration with overcrowded DMV offices.

“The most valuable tool any leader can bring to the table is the ability to listen,” Martinez says. “There’s no substitute for getting out there in the field. Go to your offices, see how interactions with your agency feel from the public’s perspective and be willing to take constructive criticism from the people you serve.”

It’s just as critical to listen to employees as it is to customers, according to Brewster, who has instituted several programs through which she gathers employee feedback in an effort at being a more transparent and communicative leader. One effort, Conversation Café, is a live conversation with her, her deputy executive director and employees, who are invited to ask virtually any question about topics as diverse as DMV programming, salaries and when the broken water fountain will be fixed.

“Nothing beats direct feedback from those on the front lines,” says Brewster.

Although they must be willing to get their hands dirty, leaders can’t afford to be overly tactical. Instead of doing everything themselves, they must learn to delegate effectively. For that reason, selecting employees is as much a skill as communicating with them.

“You have to be able to assemble a team that gels and works well together,” Shiimoto says. “Part of that is finding the right person with the right skills to do a given job and recognizing in what particular position they’ll be successful.”

For Grove, it all boils down to “systems thinking.” “I liken systems thinking to being a lifeguard on the beach,” he says. “When you’re sitting on the beach with friends and family, you only know what’s happening around you for 5 or 10 feet in any direction. When you’re the lifeguard, you’re sitting in a chair overlooking the entire beach. It’s a whole different perspective, and that’s the perspective you need to have as a leader.”

Because DMVs are an easy target for dissatisfied citizens, the last thing motor vehicle leaders need in order to succeed is perhaps the most important: a thick skin.

“If you receive feedback that is particularly harsh, try to sort through it to see if there’s any validity in it. If there is, own it, make changes and move on,” Brewster advises. “But don’t dwell on it ... When you take things personally, you have a tendency to start making decisions based on emotion. And that’s never good.”

MASTERING MOTOR VEHICLES

Amazon sells more than 291,000 books about management and leadership. Of those, zero are about motor vehicle agencies. If that surprises you, it shouldn’t: You can’t learn how to lead a DMV by reading a book, watching a video or visiting a website; the only way to learn how to helm a motor vehicle agency is to download lessons directly from the men and women who already are leading one.

That’s the principle behind the **AAMVA Leadership Academy**, a weeklong professional development program offered each May to jurisdictional employees who have demonstrated leadership potential and the ability to succeed in positions of greater responsibility within a state or provincial motor vehicle agency. Taught by veteran DMV leaders, the all-expenses-paid program focuses on topics such as defining leadership, working with legislators, teamwork and collaboration, and organizational performance management—all viewed distinctly through the lens of a motor vehicle agency.

“It’s not just generic leadership training that you’re getting; it’s how to be a leader in your industry—and that’s not something you can get every day,” says 2016 AAMVA Leadership Academy graduate Roger Grove, whose agency—the Motor Vehicles and Registries Administration in Alberta, Canada—promoted him to executive director just a few months after he attended the Academy. “It was an absolutely amazing opportunity ... That its most senior leaders would dedicate their time and resources to training colleagues who aren’t their employees speaks volumes about AAMVA and how committed it is to growing leaders in our industry.”

