

Pedestals, perfection and the modern public servant – performance expectations in a hypocritical world

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If you live in the UK and work in or around the public sector you could be forgiven for thinking that you must have nodded off during your job interview. What other explanation could there be for not remembering when they asked 'And are you perfect?'

The honest among us might respond 'Don't be silly!' The more inquisitive might muster their courage and ask 'Can you define perfect?' However, if you listen to the radio, watch TV, read a newspaper or engage in any other public debate about the performance of the UK public sector, you might be tempted to believe that our public servants, individually and collectively, are inadequate, inefficient and in a mess.

Of course, you might be right. After all, so many public discussions seem to focus on the mistakes and wrong-doings, faults, flaws and frailties of those who support our communities, but before you indulge in a bout of public servant-bashing, please spare five minutes to consider the obvious. Nobody is perfect.

People on pedestals tend to fall off. Maybe they're pushed or perhaps they simply can't stand the public scrutiny and lose their balance. Either way there is a mess on the floor. The fault lies with the people who put the poor soul up there in the first place.

All human beings make errors of judgement and practice. What matters is that we recognise and are honest about the imperfections and take action to minimise the damage that we may do.

We all have our own mental models of what is 'right.' We filter what we see, hear and experience against the context that is familiar to us. We don't ask questions. We do make assumptions. What matters is that we recognise the lack of broad perspective and try to widen our understanding before we criticise.

The need for financial security is a powerful driver. People work to support themselves and their families, now and in the future, and it's not unreasonable for us to expect rewards for our labour, so why don't we expect public servants to be paid appropriately and equally for the work they do?

Work can be a reward in itself, whether paid or unpaid. Why then, would we knowingly create public sector jobs that are unfulfilling and badly designed, where individual post-holders face constant and public criticism and blame for what is often a policy or system failure that is beyond their control?

Most of us are related to at least one public servant. Remember that next time you throw mud. If you're planning to become a public servant, learn how to duck before you take the job!

We all like to be appreciated. Whatever community or environment we live in, we all engage repeatedly with the results of the essential, effective, efficient, value-based work of our public servants. When did you last say thankyou to anyone for that?

Expectations of the public sector are high. Are we setting up our public services to fail? Criticism of those involved in delivering public sector services is often ill-founded, misjudged or just plain mischievous. The public, as the tax payers, have a right to expect that public sector workers will

behave with integrity, high moral values and commitment to the job and the community that they serve. However, before throwing stones at this particular glasshouse, maybe we should all take a realistic look at ourselves and ask 'What would I do in that situation?' or indeed 'Do I have the competence, courage and commitment to put myself in that situation?'

If you think your own house is in order and you know the facts, then you can criticise. If not, get out there and support the people who are working to improve your daily lives by evolving your environment, educating your children, improving your health, defending our population and maintaining our democracy. Your public sector needs you!

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