

**Keynote Address  
delivered by  
David Eaves  
at the  
2007APEX Symposium**

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## Introduction

Thank you Michel and the APEX organizing committee for inviting me to speak.

Before getting on stage, Michel gave me a little pep talk in which he said “Give them hell, but be humble.” I’m still trying to figure out how to balance that conflicting advice but I think I have come to a solution. I’m going to model what I think is one of the most important values of the public service: Speaking truth to power. That said, I know I’ve been asked to come here to challenge you; I also want you challenge me. While I hope these ideas will be helpful, like anything, they can be further evolved. So rather than say I’d like to reframe, I’m going to speak “hypothesis to power”.

Yesterday there was a lot of talk about assumptions and I want to follow up on those discussions today. The assumptions we make lay at the core of this debate around public service renewal and the role of baby boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Yers. So, in pursuit of that objective, I’m going to speak to three issues:

- ❑ First, I’m going to talk about who Generation Y are. I’m going to talk about them as a demographic entity as well as some broad defining traits.
- ❑ Second, I’m going to talk about three questions that we ask ourselves and that we think we have answers to... but in discussing them I’m hoping to expose some of the assumptions that make talking about public service reform and Generation Y problematic.
- ❑ And finally, I’m going a talk about what you can do about Public Service Renewal, especially in terms of Gen Y.

## Who is Gen Y?

So what is Gen Y? I think the most defining aspect of Generation Y is that, by and large, this generation grew up in the age of the Internet. Indeed, I often like to do a little test to illustrate this point. This first test is getting less reliable, but let’s do it anyways: Who here has ever used an instant messenger service? If you’ve never used a messenger service, or are uncomfortable using it, you’re probably not Gen Y. The reason I ask this is because a lot of people who didn’t grow with the Internet get uncomfortable with messenger services. They don’t like the notion of being available and seen online. In contrast, most people who are Gen Y don’t have that same angst and/or figure a way to



manage it. This technology isn't foreign to them. Indeed, it is the very opposite, it's something they've already integrated into their life. More importantly, their assumed notions of privacy, of connectedness are fundamentally different than your own. The second question I like to ask now is: Who here has a Facebook profile? Same issue, now just a whole new scale. This is a networked generation. One that expects information and people to be accessible and available. They are more connected than any generation before them. Remember that, because it is important.

But beyond technology, Gen Y also has some of its own interesting demographic issues. Let's compare Baby Boomers, with Gen Yers. So the average age of graduation for Baby Boomers was 21. For Gen Yers its 24. So Gen Yers are doing more graduate work, so they're generally better educated. But even when they are not better educated, they are taking more time to figure out what they want to learn and how they want to spend their lives. And this is true not just of education. The average age of marriage for Boomer was 20. For Gen Yers? 29. Average age when Boomers had their first child was 23, presently it is 29. So we are dealing with a generation that's far more footloose than their parents. Many, but not all, are spending more and more time exploring who they are and what they feel passionate about.

In addition, Gen Y is a generation that grew up with globalization. This means they intuitively understand the core rule set of the new economy (Which for those who still don't get it, is: educate, educate, educate). Most expect they will hold several jobs. They also know that the job security of any given job is lower, but the opportunities are also broader and the possibilities to specialize are greater. In addition, they increasingly find themselves in a world of labour scarcity. As baby boomers retire, Gen Yers know they'll be needed to fill the positions and that there is a fight for their talent.

So what does this mean? It means you have a generation of people who want to pursue their passions, are intensely focused on learning, are highly networked and expect information to flow freely, and who have opportunities awaiting them here, across the country, and around the world. These traits are easily confused with others, so people often misdiagnose Gen Yers. They are sometimes seen as possessing a sense of entitlement and are overly ambitious. Do Gen Yers want to advance quickly? Absolutely. Are they ambitious? Absolutely. But these demands reflect a desire to grow and learn, not an inherent belief that they simply deserve everything or that they are driven by money. Indeed the recent D-Code survey – which, as we will see, has its flaws, surveyed young people about the criteria for a good job. They chose “opportunities for advancement in position” as the most important feature. “Good people to work with” and “good people to report to” came second and third. Why? Because opportunities for advancement indicates that one will be able to learn and grow. And good people to work with and for isn't about fun (although that is part of it) it's about being surrounded by smart, interesting people one can learn from. If this generation only cared about money, or felt entitled, then why did “initial salary” come 9<sup>th</sup> in the survey? If they really were that materialistic, it should have come first second or third.



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So now let's tackle those three questions and the assumptions embedded within them. I'm going to start with the easiest one and then they'll become progressively more difficult.

**So question number 1: "The public service is a preferred workplace. And I know this because the D-code survey tells me it ranks second in the country."**

So I know that D-Code is a Gen X or a Nexus Generation consulting firm, but their most recent survey betrays some Boomer-like thinking. For people not familiar with the D-Code survey, they recently published a survey of 30,000 university students in which the Federal Public Service ranked as the second preferred employer after IBM. They did this by giving the students ten blank lines and asking them to fill it in with their 10 preferred employers (in order).

When I graduated from university the two firms I wanted to work for more than anywhere else was Vantage Partners, or its sister firm, CMI. Has anyone here ever heard of Vantage Partners? That's what I thought. To explain, Vantage Partners is a small boutique consulting firm based in Boston. If one is interested in negotiation consulting it is among one of the best place in the world to work and to learn. To be clear, there are maybe 100, or if we really want to be generous, 300 students in Canada who want to make a career out of negotiating. Of them, maybe, (*maybe!*) 30 of them have heard of Vantage Partners. So let's say all three of them list Vantage Partners as their number one choice – heck even if all 300 of them listed Vantage as the number one choice – Vantage will never, ever, make this list.

In fact, the only organizations that can make this list are those large enough to attract a hefty cross-section of the 30,000 applicants. And what makes this completely ridiculous is that there are maybe, maybe, 20 organizations in the country that have that scale. In fact, the thing that really surprised me was that there were more banks on the list. Google is a little bit of a surprise, given its size, but then hey! Who doesn't want to work for the next Microsoft?

What this survey suffers from is classic Boomer thinking. The assumption is that the desirable firms are the one's that can appeal to everyone. Let me offer a different perspective. The large firms are the lowest common denominator... the one place we are all willing to settle for. There are 100,000 Vantage Partners out there, each specialized in their own little niche, and there are students who want to exploit these niche organizations because their own interests dovetail perfectly with those of the organization. It's much like what I talked about yesterday – if your assumption is that everybody has a common goal, a common set of interests, in a common base of knowledge— then one will design a recruiting survey a certain way. This is precisely what D-Code did. But the results are meaningless. Every single student in the survey could have put the Federal Public Service as their 10<sup>th</sup> choice and it still would've ranked second. Indeed, such an outcome is highly plausible. Because the public service is so vast and needs virtually every skill set anybody can imagine a public service job that



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would fit them. But let's face it. If you're someone's 10<sup>th</sup> choice, they're probably not going to get around to exploring you as a real possibility.

The assumption here is that Gen Yers are like Baby Boomers. But Gen Yers, because of the Internet and their torrent of information they can access, can deepen their knowledge in the issues they care about in ways their parents could only imagine. The common set of interests in the common base of knowledge that defined the Boomer era simply doesn't exist anymore. In the 1970s and the 1980s one would gauge how smart somebody was based on how much knowledge they shared with you. For example, if we both read the same articles in the Economist or in the Globe and Mail, we would know that we were both "informed". Today knowledge is much more diffuse. My peers will know things in enormous detail that you or I will know nothing about. Moreover, neither of us will be able to easily assess the depth of their knowledge or the level of their intelligence because we don't have a common platform upon which to access it. For boomers, there was a common platform of information and so we organized ourselves around it. For Gen Yers there is no common platform of knowledge – or at least it is narrow and thin – so the question is how do we network ourselves together so to better share our knowledge? These are two very different starting points.

I do want to come back and say that I'm not claiming the public service isn't a great employer. However, I'm exceedingly concerned about the complacency that can befall a large organization when it comes to hiring Human Resources. In this regard the assumed answer to the question above and the 'confirming data' from the D-code survey are of real concern.

### **Assumption number two: "Government is getting less insular"**

So this statement came out yesterday during one of the panels. Someone commented that government is getting less formal and less insular than the 1970s.

What I really like about this statement, is that this statement is itself insular!

So... the public service is going to discuss its level of insularity *by referencing itself*.

Now that is insular. The Ottawa bubble is powerful indeed.

What really matters is not the level of insularity of the Public Service in comparison to the 1970s. What matters is how insular the federal public service is compared to other employers and organizations. That's the bar against which you need to measure yourself!

In the 1960s and 70s when every job was a lifelong job and nobody changed companies, the public service probably didn't seem all that insular compared to everybody else. Everyone was pretty insular. Today, however, the story is different. Public service careers are still lifelong and it's difficult to move in and out of the organization. In contrast even



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the banks have become flexible around careers. How easy is it to enter the public service as an EX?

I have a simple story that highlights the relative hierarchal and insular nature of the public service compared to other organizations. About a year ago I was having lunch with John Ibbitson. As you all know John Ibbitson works for the Globe and Mail, an organization (at least the Globe) that rivals the age of the federal public service. He asked me why young people are reluctant to work for the public service. So I asked him this question: "John, let's say I worked in the mailroom of the Globe and Mail. And let's say I had this incredible idea that would really benefit the organization. How many days would it take before I got a meeting with the editor to personally share with him my idea?" John responded by saying "Well, it would depend on how good the idea was... but assuming it was a really good idea, it may be somewhere between 5 and 10 days." To which I responded "Okay, so let's say I'm an ES-1 policy analyst working for the federal public service and I get this killer idea that will hugely benefit my department and the government. How many days before I could get a meeting with Deputy Minister?"

You don't need to answer the question. We all know it. It's probably never.

To top it all off, the odds are very, very strong, that even in the remote chance *the idea* made it to the Deputy Minister the analysts who came up with that idea would probably not be briefing the DM and his or her name would run this risk of being long forgotten.

What the story tells me, is that if I'm really sharp, I may have better odds contributing to the Globe and Mail [an organization older than the federal public service] as a guy in the mailroom than an ES-1 would trying to contribute to the federal public service. Why? Because the Globe and Mail [which is no New Economy .com company!] is less formal, less hierarchical, and less insular in both absolute and relative terms.

But let's put that aside this story and examine the statement on its own terms. Is it true? Is Ottawa less insular than it was in the 1970s? Maybe, but is it less insular than the 1950s? In this regard, I'm not so sure.

I had the real pleasure last year of running into this kind, elderly gentleman at a CHIA (?) event. He was quite old and retired from a lifetime of work in the Federal Public Service. For some reason we started talking about horizontality and inter-departmental cooperation. He told me about how back in his day all the ministries were co-located along Sparks Street and how everyone would eat together in cafeterias or local restaurants. Inter-ministerial problems were solved over lunch as people from different departments hashed through whatever issue was on their minds. He even claimed that from time to time the Clerk himself would come join them, the junior people, at their table and hear about their issues and help them sort through problems. Now that's horizontality! But where is our energy focused today? On the "Whole of Government" approach. Yes, there's nothing quite like a centralized top-down approach to coordinating diverse, decentralized, self-interested actors. I hope the government knows it's fighting virtually every trend.



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As a brief aside, I do want to point out that there is horizontality in government at the moment. But it's in the one place nobody thinks to look. It's called the Ottawa Sport and Social Club. I'm also fairly certain that nobody in the room knows what it is. It's the organization that all your employees aged 35 and under belong to. It's an intramural sports league where people play volleyball, floor hockey and various other games. The teams often end up being composed of public servants from diverse ministries and it's later over beers that we probably come closest to achieving horizontality in Ottawa.

Unfortunately, there are other trends we are fighting as well. For example, 50 years ago a public servant working in Ottawa probably earned the sole income for their family – this meant their partner did something different than they did; either staying at home or working or volunteering elsewhere. Today, most public servants are probably married to other public servants. This means the culture you live with at work, and the assumptions it breeds, are also likely to prevail at home. Indeed, those whose partners do something else find it increasingly difficult to stay in Ottawa. I've had several friends who have left or are leaving the public service because their partner could not find a job in Ottawa in a career of their choice. Sadly, when their partners leave, so do they. Thus the pool of diverse thinking shrinks further and Ottawa risks becoming more insular.

Finally, I want to touch on a name mentioned by a number of yesterday's speakers: Jim Collins, the author of "From Good to Great." I, too, love Jim Collins. But Collins has some important lessons about culture and companies that were not mentioned yesterday. Jim Collins says that a company's culture is like its antibodies. It ejects, like a virus, those individuals who do not think along the lines of the organization's culture. This means that people who think differently will not only fail to succeed, they will usually leave the organization altogether. The challenge this presents Ottawa is that we have a city where it's difficult to maintain a diverse labour pool and an organization [like any other] whose culture rejects those who think differently. This isn't a great recipe for becoming less insular.

Is Ottawa more insular than in the 1970s? I don't know if it matters. It is more insular than many companies for a generation that wants to explore new ideas and learn that's a real challenge.

I want to be clear here about the implications of what I'm saying. What I'm not saying is that smart people don't work for the public service. What I am saying is that a certain profile of intelligence gets rewarded in this organization [like any other] and what I'm concerned about is the diversity of intelligence within the federal public service. This organization needs to tackle a massive array of complex issues and, as a result, it really must draw upon the collective wisdom of its employees. If, consciously or unconsciously, we limit the range and type of thinking within this organization, then we limit its capacity to a) offer a range of answers to the countries with most pressing questions and b) reform itself.



There is another important lesson in all this. Some people seem to believe that Gen Yers will ultimately save and/or reform the public service – once they take over. I'm less confident. If Jim Collins is correct then those Gen Yers who stay in the public service will be those who are most likely to think like their predecessors. More importantly, most people look to previous models of leadership when they take over. Don't we all, after all, ultimately become our parents? The models Gen Yers will have will be those who came before them. Why should we believe that they will act any differently? If we are going to renew the public service it must start now. Today. With you.

**Question and assumption number three: “The public service has a monopoly on public service”**

I want to tread very careful with this next question and assumption because it strikes at the heart of the very identity of what most public servants believes makes them public servants. I want to be clear: I know that we're on sensitive ground – but this makes the question all the more important.

When talking about this issue I often use a simple example. Take for example the guy who fixes cell phone towers for Telus. Is he performing a public service?

Cell phones are one of the most transformative technologies to appear in the last four decades. They have literally revolutionized peoples' lives. Among numerous other things cell phones have created jobs, improved productivity (I know, hard to believe), connected families & friends. And, as they become cheaper and cheaper (such as prepaid phones) almost everyone can enjoy their benefits. I remember reading that a homeless man was able to use an old cell phone to direct police to him after the big storm in Vancouver trapped him under some trees in Stanley Park.

So I know that the Telus employee works for a for-profit company, but does he not take pride in his work, does he not believe the world is a better place because of what he does? I think so. So why isn't he providing a public service?

Better yet is the example of the open source software engineer who created the servers that helped coordinate the rescue after Katrina. These guys were literally doing their day-to-day job – just temporarily on a new, unpaid project – and, in only a few days, they accomplished more than the US Government accomplished in months (years, if one includes trying to tie together the various IT systems of the different rescue agencies). Were they doing a public service?

My point is that public service can't be defined by a title. Many Gen Yers (like their boomer parents) want to derive meaning and purpose from their work. And there are many places they can do that. There's the public service, there are nonprofits like Engineers without Borders or Journalists for Human Rights, but there are also for-profit firms. Just because someone works for a for-profit firm doesn't mean they don't believe in what they do or that they aren't making their community, city, country or world a better place. I'll admit, many companies don't care. But many do. *And they are motivated*



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*by this feeling.* More importantly, people in these organizations feel empowered to take action and to set and achieve goals. For them, the sense of public service can sometimes be stronger.

This said, I want to go still further. I've been to a number of government recruiting events where people talk about how public service is a challenge of balancing numerous priorities and interests as opposed to the for profit world where people only worry about the bottom line. This line of reasoning is really disconcerting to me. For one it reflects a very simplistic view of the private non-profit sector. Many companies – although admittedly not all - aren't just managing to the bottom line. They have all sorts of concerns: the environment, their employees, their community, etc. Take me for example, I work as a negotiation consultant. I derive real meaning from my work, I help people and organizations resolve conflicts that impede them from working and collaborating. I believe my work makes the world better place. Moreover, I have a range of concerns. I buy carbon credits because I fly too much and I'm worried about the environment. I'm not required to do it, it hurts my "bottom line," but I do it.

It also creates a silly image of the public service. Yes, the bottom line is not the most important thing in any ministry, but it still must be managed. Canadian citizens are not infinitely taxable – government departments do not have infinite resources and so priorities must be set and resources allocated. Indeed, this myth of the public versus private sector is deeply concerning. Last summer I interviewed dozens of young public servants and many expressed discontent with their job. When I asked those who are unhappy if they would consider a job in the private sector many said "No, I couldn't do that, working for a company that makes money feels dirty." (I'm not embellishing the language used). Let's put aside the fact that these public servants believe that the vast majority of Canadians - who work for for-profit companies – are engaged in a 'dirty' activity. Instead, I want to focus on how this perspective hurts the public service.

The first question I ask in a job interview is what job are you preparing me for? The assumption I have for any job is I'll probably hold it for two to four years. After that I'm looking to get promoted, or to move on somewhere else. What I want to know is: what skills and knowledge will this job give me? What job are you preparing me for? When the public service claims it has nothing in common with any employer in the country, it creates barriers to exit. It's telling me that the skills I develop will only be useful within this organization. But those barriers to exit are, in reality, barriers to entry. Why would I limit my future career paths by taking a job that limits me to a single organization that is effectively located in a single city?

Rather than talking about what makes the public service different from everybody else I'd love to see a public service that talks about what it has in common with other organizations. My goal here is not to diminish the value of the public service, but to reintegrate it into the broader labour market.

Do young people care about public service? Yes. Do they care about *the* public service? That is less clear. For my friends and the young people I engage with, public service is



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less and less a role than a feeling, a sense of contribution. Yesterday I met a United Way employee during one of the networking sessions and he described to me how the 'new charity' is the enablement of others. That describes something I've been trying to articulate for a long time. People are not looking to become protectors or providers, they want to become enablers, to help others help themselves. Increasingly they can get that feeling, and that sense a contribution from many NGOs and for-profit firms. To compete we need to offer them not only work that has meaning, but a sense of impact, that they are directly contributing to making the world a better place.

### **So what can you do?**

I want to start off by pointing out that symbols matter. I want everybody to grab their name tag and look at it. What do you see? The APEX logo? What do you think that logo communicates?



For the last day and a half, I've heard everyone talk about how they want a public service that is less hierarchical, less insular, and more innovative. But symbols matter. The APEX logo clearly conveys that this organization believes it is hierarchy. It also makes very clear who's at the top of it. Do you want a different public service? Maybe we could start by changing the symbols we use to tell everyone who we are.

One of the best articles I've read on leadership was by the President of Scandinavian Airlines who talked about how, after much reflection, he flipped his organizational chart upside down so as to place him at the bottom, understanding that his role was to support everybody above him, so they could, in turn, support the front-line workers who actually touch the customers. Maybe we could flip the APEX logo on its head?



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So I have a few thoughts about what we can do. I'll start big and then get more personal.

The first, is that I'd love to see a public service that connects employees and allows them to search each other out by areas of interests, experience, and knowledge. And then to have all public policies on ? wiki's so that anybody in the public service can read and comment and make anybody else's work better. A networked, open-sourced public service, now that would be exciting!

But, of course, that's big and structural and nobody can do it on their own, so I'm just going to throw it out there and hope some DM picks up on it.

So what can you do? With all this talk of Jim Collins, I want to come back to one of the best things he says: "Leaders model the values and set the culture of an organization." Am I not looking at the leaders of the public service? You are empowered to model the values and set the culture for this organization. That is *real power*.

So one of the first things I'd say is mentor someone. One big problem with the public service is that nobody has any incentive to coach and mentor anyone else. I know that when you invest time and energy into someone, they'll probably end up entering a competition and get a job elsewhere and so someone else will benefit. I know that must be frustrating. But mentor someone. People who are successful didn't get there on their own, they had others looking after and helping them. Be that person.

Change the culture. Make it less hierarchical. I know some of you do this already, but not everybody does. So when someone who works for you has an idea that gets airtime, make sure they get into the meetings with the higher-ups. When I worked as a consultant, it was unimaginable that a partner would meet with a client on something I was working on and I wouldn't be in the room. How was I supposed to know what the problems were if I wasn't hearing it from the horse's mouth? Not only did I work better, but I learnt a ton. I know the atmosphere for doing this is getting better, but force the issue. Bring your people with you whenever you can.

One of the public servants I respect the most once told me that one of the secrets to his success was understaffing his teams. Young people are hungry and want to work, especially if the work is interesting. Larger teams usually mean there are more senior people who will take the sexier files. Smaller teams may have to work harder but a) they generally are more motivated because everybody gets to do more interesting work and b) they collaborate more easily because everybody is overworked and wants help. This type of environment can be intoxicating and fun, especially when you are learning a tremendous amount.

Finally, I'd say, leave! Get out of here! Try a job at a non-profit or for-profit. Almost everybody in the public service is permitted to take a sabbatical, so do it! Learn something new, some new skills, some new management techniques, get a new perspective, and bring it back to the public service. The public service will be richer for it and your team will learn more from you.



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So I know I have already gone way over my time and although there are a few more things I could share I'd better cut myself off, so we can try to take a question or two.



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