
Posted on Thu, Jun. 10, 2004

Schembri's leadership lessons come from real life

By Bill Cotterell
CAPITAL CURMUDGEON

If you ever get a chance to hear Anthony Schembri make a speech, go listen.

The new secretary of the Department of Juvenile Justice was still being introduced at a graduation luncheon of the Certified Public Manager program last week when he strode onstage and began tugging program director Howard Rasmussen's elbow.

"OK, thanks," Schembri muttered, as the new CPM graduates tittered. "No, really, that's fine, thanks," he continued until Rasmussen gave up and sat down.

"Of all the graduates in this room, how many consider themselves to be patient people? Raise your hands. Good. Get out," Schembri said. "Patience is not a virtue of a leader. Leadership is about power, the people who have it and what they do with it."

His commencement address sounded like Yogi Berra channeling Leo Durocher. A recording of his speech captures the short, choppy sentences but not the New Yorker's use of the hands or Schembri's confident grin as he outlined leadership lessons he has learned from flamethrowers, the Ed Sullivan Show, his wife's cooking, King Arthur's court and disassembling the car of a politically protected drunk.

"The strongest force in government is inertia. Trying to get government to change, you will struggle with that," he said. "And when you try to manage change, you will run across my wife's roast beef."

He likes the crusty ends of roast, Schembri explained, but his wife always cut them off because her mother did. So he asked his mother-in-law, who said her mother always cooked that way. So he asked his wife's grandmother, who said she once had a small baking pan.

"This whole family has been making roast beef like this for 40 years and the reason is long gone," he said. "We're like that in government. We're doing the same things with greater conviction; we're doing the *wrong* things with greater conviction and the reason is long gone."

Schembri said he learned his first rule of leadership - "think on your feet" - as a 12-year-old grocery clerk.

"This was in Brooklyn, where we changed the national motto from 'E Pluribus Unum' to 'What the hell are you lookin' at?'," he said. "And when you think on your feet, you must look like you have all the confidence in the world. If you don't look like you know what you're doing, the people who work for you won't look like they know what they're doing."

Then he told of a lady dropping her garter at the court of Camelot - apparently an incredible faux pas in those days. Retrieving it for her, he said, King Arthur scorned his courtiers for their snooty pretension and made "Knight of the Garter" England's highest honor. Schembri's moral: "When you're the boss, don't be afraid to use your power."

When he worked in New York, Schembri said, one of his employees got his fifth drunk-driving arrest but kept his job because of political pull.

"I decided to take his car apart. We had 24 hours to return his car and I put two mechanics on it. We returned it to him in a big bin," he said. The employee wanted him arrested but public reaction was favorable, Schembri said. "I took a guy's car apart and became a hero. People want to see us in government use our power to make change."

At DJJ, Schembri is taking over one of state government's most troubled agencies. One of the first problems he recognized, he said, was "my probation officers have 428 tasks for each case. They're spending more time keeping their jobs than doing their jobs."

So he wants to eliminate some rules he considers needless, and he wants managers to admit mistakes. He said organizations breed a tendency to "bury mistakes," so they get made all over again, like cutting the ends off a roast.

A corollary to that, he said, is not to misread a warning for an insult. Driving in upstate New York, he said, a woman almost ran him off a country road.

"She yelled, 'Pig!' and I yelled at her, 'Cow!'," he said. "About 100 feet later, I hit a loose pig on the road. She was trying to warn me but I was a smartass and I didn't get her message. You have to get the message."

Everyone thinks they are good judges of talent, but Schembri said a manager has to really be one.

"When I was in the Army, they assigned a convicted arsonist to my platoon. I made him the flame thrower," said Schembri. "I don't know why people laugh at that. I told it to the governor. He threw his head back. I don't understand why. What am I supposed to do, follow this guy around and see if he's lighting matches? I have time for this? The guy likes fire, give him fire.

"We had the shiniest flame thrower in the division. It worked 100 percent of the time.

"Look for the talent. You are like Ed Sullivan," Schembri told the new certified managers. "Ed Sullivan couldn't sing, he couldn't dance, he couldn't tell a joke. He was on television for 30 years, a guy who couldn't do anything. But you know what he did? He recognized talent. That's what you do, you recognize talent."

Contact political editor Bill Cotterell at (850) 671-6545 or bcotterell@tallahassee.com.