

An interview with Chip Morrison: Public service as a value

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Earlier this year, Charles "Chip" Morrison completed seven years of service in the McKernan administration, first as Commissioner of Administration and then as Commissioner of Labor. Before undertaking these state government assignments, Morrison worked for 19 years in local government, including nine years as city manager in Auburn. At a time when experience in government, whether in an appointive or elected capacity, is looked upon by many with a mixture of suspicion and disdain, Chip Morrison preaches the sermon of government-as-service. His distinguished record of public service provides him both the credentials and the informed perspective from which to address the value of public service. In the following interview, Morrison also talks about the values which have guided him in his public service career and touches upon a number of public policy issues with which he was involved as a department head.

MPR: In terms of your government service, whether at the municipal or the state level, what were the values that you adhered to?

Chip Morrison: First, high ethical standards. My test for high standards was to never do anything that I didn't want to read about in the newspaper. Second, I have always wanted government to be trusted. The only way I know to increase trust is for people to be able to understand and believe what you say. One of the big issues in trusting government is getting things done on time. For example, if you promise to do something, you finish it at least five minutes before you said you would. There are all kinds of excuses for not being timely, but I can only think of a handful of times in my public service career in when I didn't get something to someone on time or sooner.

Another value I adhere to is customer service. The citizens government serve are its customers. I realize that is popular jargon now, but I have been using it for 25 years. And I truly believe it. The folks that we deal with on a day-in, day-out basis in government want solutions to their problems. They should be treated just like the customer they are. Governments that achieve good customer service successfully solve the image issue. The image of government in today's society is largely negative. It is popular to say that government never gets anything done. That is not true, but we in government are our own worst enemies because we don't treat citizens as customers.

The fourth major value is that a government's only real resources are its employees. They need to be listened to, consulted with, and involved in the entire process. Employees have to be involved in almost all aspects of policy-making in an organization. As an administrator, I spent a lot of time just walking around talking to folks. Line employees always were and continue to be my heroes because they do the job every day; whether it's the worker picking up the garbage or the one helping somebody file a claim and talking to that person about alternatives for the future. Those folks deserve a lot of support, but on occasion, they feel isolated and abandoned. Frequently, policy leaders (elected and appointed) talk against the people who work for them.

They claim public employees don't work hard enough. I always have had a real problem with people who make the bureaucracy the enemy. The bureaucracy isn't the enemy, ever.

MPR: Do you think that is true, not only at the state level, but the federal level as well?

Morrison: Federal, state, and local. I have seen city councilors say the city employees are the problem. Never in my experience has that been true. I have worked in a lot of organizations and have never known that to be true. People go into public service because they value providing services to the public. To denigrate them is both counterproductive and wrong.

MPR: Of the values that you have cited, do you think these are shared by other agency heads?

Morrison: Yes, at least the agency heads that I worked with while I was in state government. They came there not for personal goals, because a lot of them could do much better outside of government, but because they thought government could work and they wanted to prove that. I believe that they did. A lot of state government employees told me the McKernan administrative heads were very different from those who had preceded them, just in terms of their work ethic if nothing else. Maybe that's a sign of the times. Things are much more complex in government than they have ever been and hard working professional managers are needed. Of course, there were a couple of good reasons for our work ethic: first, our boss wouldn't allow us to do otherwise, and second, we came there with that intent.

MPR: When you went into both of your cabinet positions, first in Administration, then Labor, did you have any specific goals and objectives?

Morrison: No. In both cases, I did not know very much about the organization. I assumed the Department of Administration involved the internal operations of the government. Frankly, before I came into state government, I didn't even know there was a Department of Administration. So I came in using the values that I outlined as a backdrop and tried to work with the folks on the customer service theme. It was truly new for internal operations to think they too had customers. They, of course, serve everybody else in government, but had never thought about it in that way. It became a rallying point.

MPR: So thinking of their work as customer service provided them a different perspective. But were they not already providing the service?

Morrison: They were, but not from the perspective of their customers. Customer service is pretty simple. You ask the customer what they want, how you can help, and then you work with the customer to evaluate whatever you are doing. We initiated customer service surveys to get feedback about how we could improve services, what was right, what was wrong, and so on. That was new on the internal operations side.

The Department of Labor was a little different. It was a challenging time to go to the Department of Labor because the economy had just turned sour and we had more work than we could handle. We had more unemployed people, more workers who needed training and more laborers who had grievances with employers over separation issues. It was truly fascinating to be in the Labor

Department. We focused on customer needs in a time of incredible stress both for the customer and for the people in the department. As you know, the state Labor Department was not caught in the down-sizing of state government the way everybody else was. Because our money came from the federal government, when the unemployment rate went up, the money went up — not in proportion to the magnitude of the problem, but at least we added employees in that time period. However, we still had far more customers than we had resources. To attempt to step back, refocus activities, and continually adjust services to be more customer responsive was a real challenge. All the while there were people in line needing those services.

MPR: If you were to reinvent state government today -- that is, you personally saying, " This is how we're going to reinvent it," or "This is what the outcome will be," -- how would government be different?

Morrison: I am not a great structure changer. Any structure will work if the right values are shared and leadership employs those values as its guiding principles. I do not have a preconceived notion of what could be better in terms of reinventing government. How to do it differently? I would put a lot more effort and resources into the TQM effort which Governor McKernan initiated and make sure that it was long-lived. Employees and external clients are both viewed as "customers." Systems are built that are responsive. Everybody gets involved in the effort. TQM works better in some agencies than others, but that is how you change things. I have used processes similar to TQM for the 30 years I've been in public management and they work.

For example, the garbage collector does know how to design a garbage truck. When I was in Auburn as City Manager, we went to buy a garbage truck the way it had always been done, which was the purchasing agent bidding the same old piece of equipment. But when we talked to the people who actually worked behind the truck, we found out they were suffering back injuries from lifting barrels too high. There was no reason that the truck couldn't be designed with a lower end. At the time, this was new thinking — that garbage collectors would have something to say about the design of a \$100,000 piece of equipment. But they had a lot to say about it and they were right!

People like to be involved. It is a real motivator to have somebody say, "What do you think?" It is so much a part of my nature that I don't recognize that it isn't that common.

MPR: On the labor side, the issue that is continuously debated concerns the appropriate role for the state to play in job creation. What can the government do to create jobs other than the obvious, which is to hire more state employees?

Morrison: I believe government can help create the infrastructure that will foster jobs. One example is telecommunications technology. A problem with the redevelopment of Loring Air Base is that it is not part of the state's telecommunications network. It needs to be if any high-tech industry is to locate there. Those industries must be able to do what I do, which is talk to my home office via computer every day, get instructions, and transmit data back and forth. Providing that type of infrastructure will help create jobs.

When I came to Auburn as city manager, there were some infrastructure problems. I visited businesses and talked to them about what they needed. They needed sewer lines in different places. They needed land available with necessary services for development. Providing physical infrastructure helps to attract jobs.

Providing the social/legal structure is also part of the government's role. Even 18 years ago, in my meetings with Auburn business people, worker's compensation was raised as an issue. Many changes have been made, although people have not begun to feel the effects of some of those changes. The state also needs a tax structure that is not disadvantageous to business and a regulatory process through which businesses can get prompt decisions. If for example, you compare Maine's business climate with that of South Carolina in terms of tax, utility costs, and regulatory issues, you get sick because we cannot compete.

Government makes sure that there are no impediments. It provides the technological, physical, and legal (or social) infrastructure that will improve business climate.

One other approach will also foster economic development. The state needs to develop stronger partnerships with regional and local development organizations. Most development occurs at a local level and the state needs to recognize and support the vital role of local governments and the development organizations they have created.

MPR: How would you change that?

Morrison: We have to peck away a little bit at a time. We will not change the business climate over-night. The problems have been recognized at the policy level, in both the legislative and executive branches and some changes have been initiated. Worker's compensation has changed some. The environmental permitting process has improved. The tax issues are probably the most difficult because Maine is a high cost state; that is, it is expensive to provide governmental services in Maine. There are some logical reasons for that. First, we do not have a high per capita income. We have a lot of poor and borderline-poor citizens who simply need more services than citizens in other states. We have this enormous land area over which people are spread, which means the cost of every service on a per unit basis, if you will, is higher than it is in more compact places. We can't do anything about that. Maine will always have people living in small and often isolated communities and requiring basic services such as education. We can't force people out of those remote areas. And they all have a stake in the services that the state and local governments provide.

MPR: In rural areas, what are the possibilities for economic development other than in recreational developments, which are usually seasonal?

Morrison: That is one of the problems with the redevelopment of Loring Air Base. It is away from the beaten path and that is probably one of the reasons they closed the base. The Air Force didn't want to live there. The bottom line may have been you can't play golf there twelve months a year. But with modern telecommunications technology, rural areas are not as remote as they once were. Technology-based businesses can take advantage of Maine's highly educated, highly motivated work force by locating processing centers in some of the more rural areas of the state.

MPR: In your estimation, has the state over the past eight years made definitive progress towards improving the business environment in Maine?

Morrison: Yes. But, I was part of it and people sometimes tell you what you want to hear more than you would like them to. But what I hear is business folks saying that Maine is a better place to do business than it was; we are headed in the right direction. The economy has been rough over the last four years. A major factor influencing economic growth is how people feel about the future. If they don't feel good about it, they are not going to put their money into hiring more people. Many Maine employers, even those whose businesses have been profitable through the recession, have been conservative about adding new employees. Instead, expansion comes by adding overtime hours for existing employees and by out-sourcing services — hiring contract employees as opposed to adding to their own payroll. We must reverse this trend before we can make real progress in economic growth.

MPR: The direct way that government can help create jobs is to increase its own size. But over the last four years the size of government has been reduced at every level. But, as you have already suggested, because of the geographic size of Maine and the difficulty and expense of providing services, it seems that there must be a point at which no matter how strong the desire to continue to shrink government, we will hit the bottom.

Morrison: In the policy process I have observed that no one wants to make the decision about what service government should not provide. Most public policy-makers, and I put myself in that category, have a hard time saying, "We don't need to do that anymore." Many of us were trained, or grew up, in an era where we made choices about which desirable new service we would add and which desirable new service we would choose not to do. The current choices, however, are between which desirable service we will continue and which one we will discontinue. That's a very different decision-making process. Neither administrators nor elected policy-makers are comfortable making those decisions.

Stakeholders and interest groups, for the most part, are very vocal. It is human to avoid conflict and government is no different. You try to avoid conflict and you can't. You want to be able to do everything and do it for less cost. In theory, everything can always be a little more efficient. But that is not the answer in the long term. The answer is the choice: What shouldn't we do anymore? Government must then articulate clearly why it made that choice and then get out of the business. Reducing everything a little bit only reduces the quality of services. We have done a lot of the latter. I am just as guilty as others in saying we can still provide some program or service by simply working a little harder. Sometimes you just can't. Tough choices need to be made.

MPR: Your experience in labor areas must have involved some of the OSHA and other federal mandates. Is there a sense that these federal mandates to states are becoming more or less manageable?

Morrison: That is difficult for me to judge. The Maine Department of Labor is only involved with OSHA from the standpoint of safety training. But the Department of Labor is the enforcer in the public sector.

In the private sector, we created a different way to approach workplace issues. Traditionally, a company was given a list of 42 items that had to be fixed. Over the past three years, the department selected the companies/ industries with the worst injury experiences and said, "We'll work with you to have voluntary inspections." The new approach is to work with them prior to the time that inspections are to be made. The Labor Department comes in and offers to help with the company's personnel training needs. In some cases, they even make loans for safety equipment. Obviously, this represents a different way to look at the process of regulation and it has worked very well.

Selling business on improving safety conditions has been made easier in Maine because of the high cost of worker's compensation. The only way that people will lower their costs is to have fewer injuries. This is where Maine employers have done a good job. It has been gratifying to see the whole safety community, particularly OSHA, the state Labor Department, and Maine Employers Mutual really working together a lot more in that area. It has been less about mandates and regulations and more about working together to reduce injuries.

MPR: Is it too early in the Worker's Compensation reform process to see the kind of results people are hoping for?

Morrison: They cannot be quantified yet. Major reforms were implemented just a year ago. There are some early indications that costs are down, but this is a five-year process. At the end of five years, people will be able to clearly evaluate what compensation costs have done. To attempt to evaluate costs before then would be premature and possibly misleading.

MPR: Were you involved in the workers' compensation reform process?

Morrison: Only in terms of producing data. The Labor Department is the keeper of all of the data on workplace injuries, both public sector and private sector. We provided data, but I was not a major player in the reform process.

MPR: What about welfare-to-work programs? These have certainly been among the important initiatives of the McKernan administration.

Morrison: The governor highlighted welfare-to-work as an initiative for everybody in the administration. What he proposed in Maine is close to what President Clinton has proposed at the national level. This is a policy which everyone can agree with in principle, but it hasn't happened quickly enough from the perspective of somebody who believes everybody should be working if they possibly can. I believe we have to support people who want to work.

The problem with the welfare system is that it doesn't assist people to go off welfare. We need to develop a system that doesn't allow people to be better off receiving welfare than working. Health care costs are covered for most people on welfare. Frequently, however, when someone first enters the job market, health insurance is not part of his or her benefits package. That alone is a huge cost. If you compare what people can do for their dependents while they are on welfare programs with how much they can net once they are off, if those are not equal, no rational person

will go off welfare. Why would you want to decrease the standard of living for your children? That is the bottom line for most people.

There are a number of other things to consider, but welfare reform requires capable individuals to work. Under the governor's reform package, a person could only stay on welfare for two years after which he or she would have to find employment. Yet, supports like health care and child care would continue until the working parent reached self-sufficiency.

MPR: There have been several fits and starts of pro-grams that are meant to address long-term unemployment. Are there some specific successes you can point to in your experience that suggest that we are on the right track?

Morrison: Some success has been realized in training and education programs, mostly through the technical college system. A high percentage, perhaps 90 percent, of people who graduate from programs at the technical colleges get jobs. There is a danger in that, too. Jobs are changing as rapidly as anybody can imagine. We may be training somebody for a specific job today that may be gone in 10 years. The training and education package has to not only train somebody for a job that exists, but also be flexible enough that they can continue to learn new skills. The hardest thing to teach people is how to learn. We are able to teach people how to run a computer, but we also need to teach people how to run the next generation of computers! .

MPR: What about defense conversion? That now is a very large issue in this state.

Morrison: Yes, it is and it will be a big issue for the next five years. Our conversion efforts must have succeeded by then because I do not think we will have many defense jobs in this state down the road. Probably all of our defense facilities are at risk. Two major military facilities are left (the Brunswick Naval Station and the Kittery Naval Shipyard) plus the private companies who are dependent on military procurement. How do we help them? I'm not convinced there is a major role for state government with these firms. Bath Iron Works (BIW), which does a high percentage of military business, does not want any state governmental assistance with changing their products. They are working very hard to do that themselves.

There are two sides to defense conversion. There is the business side; helping businesses retool into something that is not defense-dependent. That is difficult because, for the most part, they don't want government around. The second aspect is working with the individuals who are casualties of defense realignment. Even if the businesses take care of themselves, they will be smaller than they were in their heyday and will have far fewer employees. That means that we need to help laid off employees find other lines of work. That is a real function of the Labor Department — having available training and education programs so that people can find new career paths.

MPR: But isn't this a case of trying to replace high paying jobs with lower paying jobs?

Morrison: That is part of the adjustment process. Laid-off defense workers most likely cannot make the money they were making in their old jobs. In the traditional job market, their pay and benefits are way above average for Maine. So if they go back into traditional employment, a pay

cut is very likely. One of the options, then, is to work with people who have ideas for starting their own businesses. We have worked hard in Maine — and with some success — to provide an infrastructure where people can work on their own entrepreneurial enterprises. Initially, they are not going to make much money there either. But over the long term there is more income potential if the business flourishes. The potential is higher, at least, than if they went back into salaried employment.

MPR: Do you have any words of advice for the next administration relative to the policy issues you discussed here?

Morrison: The best thing the next administration could do is to keep the TQM program going and to bring top notch professionals to lead the change process in state government. To me, TQM is a process which increases the vitality of government. Employees are the real resources of Maine state government, but sometimes it takes political leaders a while to find that out (they ought to know it going in). The next administration will also need to have hard working, competent people who dedicate their lives to public service.

MPR: Would you consider returning to public service?

Morrison: I am asked that question frequently. I loved government service. I had a great time in both city and state government. When I started, I held the popular public perception of state government, that nothing ever gets done in Augusta. I left believing just the opposite. Someday I may try again, if the opportunity arises. I consider myself very lucky to have had the opportunities for public service that I have had with both the City of Auburn and with the State of Maine.

Chip Morrison is currently Regional Marketing Director for the ICMA Retirement Corporation. He was recently named Maine Public Administrator of the Year by the Maine Chapter of the American Society for Public Administration.

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