

ANZSOG EMPA – Dean’s Prize Address

By Duane McKibben, New Zealand Public Service Commission

EMPA 2020 cohort graduation 11 March 2022

Tēnā koutou katoa

Nō Kuinirani Ahitereiria au

E noho ana au ki Te Whanganui ā-Tara

He Kaikōmihana Tuarua au

E mahi ana au ki Te Kawa Mataaho

Ko Duane McKibben tōku ingoa

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa

Hello EMPA friends and fellow Public Service colleagues. While I deliver this speech from Wellington in Aotearoa New Zealand, I’d like to also acknowledge the first nations peoples from all the lands we join this graduation ceremony today – and to pay my respect to elders past, present and emerging.

What a journey we’ve been on! It feels like eons ago that we were gathered together in February 2020 for *Delivering Public Value*. As we heard back from previous alumni – and looked forward at the number of assignments ahead of us – I don’t think I was alone in thinking: ‘what have I done?!’

And of course, none of us may quite have seen what was quickly coming around the corner. All of us were impacted by COVID-19 as we were pulled into our jurisdictional responses and adapted to online learning delivery. As the first 'COVID cohort' we grieved – sometimes in denial, sometimes in anger, perhaps moving towards a begrudging acceptance – that the world was just going to be different now. Gone was our opportunity to gather together, build stronger relationships over residentials and of course miss out on some fabulous trips along the way! Singapore sling, anyone?

But we persevered, and we adapted, and – to borrow the phrase from *Decision Making Under Uncertainty* – we 'muddled through'. In many ways, that's often what the Public Service does. But I think COVID-19 also showed how agencies can join forces and move with agility to solve complex challenges in a crisis. We now need to be able to do this all the time. We are faced with challenges every day. These challenges are increasingly complex and haven't necessarily got a template answer. Problems such as climate change or child poverty. And people increasingly expect government to deliver services in ways that work best for them.

But it's not just about delivering better outcomes and services. One just has to look at the potential for, or the reality of, erosion of trust in government and public institutions world-wide to realise we as public servants have something important that we need to protect and maintain. Even here in little old New Zealand – we are not immune to those global forces. Recently, we witnessed an occupation outside our own Parliament, protesters fuelled by misinformation and disinformation. We as public service leaders must find ways to earn the trust of every citizen and preserve and protect those things that underpin our own form of democracy. Things like political neutrality, free and

frank advice. Things that build trust and legitimacy in our system – we are the system.

Here in New Zealand we've been talking a lot about the spirit of service that underpins our work as public servants. Our foundation legislation was recently reformed and our new Public Service Act 2020 captures a beautiful phrase: *“The fundamental characteristic of the Public Service is acting with a spirit of service to the community... public service leaders must preserve, protect, and nurture the spirit of service that public servants bring to their work”*.

This idea fundamentally connects with where we started our journey – *Delivering Public Value*. So, what brought you to the Public Service? And why have you chosen this as your career? For me, starting my career on the frontline – first as a teacher, then as a client service officer in the Child Support Agency – provided me with a grounding about what we are here to do – serve people, make a difference. Prioritise a higher purpose, over profit. Use our diverse experiences and backgrounds, as well as our skills and qualifications, to do something important.

Looking through our cohort's student booklet that was provided at the beginning of the EMPA, I can see a spirit of service shining through. A range of diverse people who are motivated to better themselves, so that we can continue to serve our communities – whether through policy, operations or corporate leadership roles. I see people who are motivated to solve social, economic and environmental challenges. People who are keen to professionalise their Public Service career – perhaps broaden their skills beyond their technical expertise – and to be confident and credible to progress

to more senior roles. And of course, to build strong connections and lasting relationships that can nurture and sustain us.

I hope that for many of us, participating in the EMPA has been a key milestone in our own careers. Thank you to ANZSOG for creating the opportunity for us to learn and grow.

- Thank you to Dr Chris Walker and each of the subject leaders and guest speakers who have taught us along the way. The exposure to academics and practitioners on a range of public policy and public management themes have truly broadened our perspectives.
- Thank you to the groups that we worked with along the way on assignments, big and small.
- Thank you to the work based project teams that stuck through thick and thin – and a particular shout out to my own team – Laura Babian, Jonathan Beatty, Kylie Bennetts, Elsie Loh and Jayne Russell. These projects have given us an opportunity to apply our learning through a real-world challenge, perhaps one that truly stretched us outside our comfort zones.
- Thank you to the ANZSOG staff such as Rosie, Shannon, Vicki, Gabe, Lulu and more, working tirelessly behind the scenes to help make our experience smooth.
- Thank you to each of our agencies who invested heavily in our development.
- Thank you to our friends, family and whānau who sustained us to keep going when we were over-stretched – whether through small acts of kindness or big sacrifices.

- And thank you to each of you who went on this roller-coaster ride together!

So, where to from here? Like some others of you, I am yet to complete my electives. I take my hat off to those of you who have managed to complete these too and I hope you enjoy your new-found freedoms!

I take with me into my next chapter a newfound commitment to the ideal of public service and a strengthened leadership character. Here's a few things that program did for me:

1. **It has broadened my views beyond technical expertise**, helping me to better see the world through different perspectives. Now when I am faced with an intractable challenge or a wicked problem, rather than needing to know the technical way through, I am able to be curious about the problem, ask questions and better navigate uncertainty while the problem is understood, and the path forward emerges.
2. **It has tested my resilience**. Like many of you, I have been challenged by having to juggle what has felt like an unsustainable workload at work, as well as study, and other life challenges on top. I have examined my own mindset, reframed the way I thought about things and found ways to manage my energy levels as I navigate the challenge of the interplay between self, system and role.
3. **It has grown my courage to effect change**. Linking back to public purpose and the reason for being a public servant – and connecting with other leaders in different jurisdictions – has re-energised my passion for making a difference. I now have a wider array of tools and increased confidence to effect positive change.

I really hope you achieved your goals, despite the challenges we all experienced along the way.

So, cohort of 2020 – we are here as Public Service leaders. Leadership is a privilege, and we have the opportunity to make a difference every day. And it was a privilege to share the EMPA journey with you all.

I'd like to finish with a whakataukī – a proverb that sums up the importance of working collectively:

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini. My success is not mine alone, but it is the strength of many.

I wish you all the very best with whatever's next for you and hope to stay in touch as alumni, as we continue to make a difference.

No reira, kia ora tātou katoa.