

Ask not what your country can do for you..

A new generation seeks public service in the private sector, says Brunswick's GEORGE LITTLE

AS SPOKESMAN FOR THE CENTRAL Intelligence Agency from 2007 to 2011, I was accustomed to surprises. Still, I could never have predicted that I would be asked to prepare the communications plan used to publicly discuss the May 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound.

On the day of the raid, I carried, as inspiration, the memorial booklet I had saved from the funeral of a friend lost on 9/11. I reflected then – and in the ensuing months and years – on the call to public service born out of that terrible day, when thousands died and America and its allies began preparations for a new war. A generation of courageous young people rushed to sign up for the military, intelligence agencies, and other roles in government.

For over 15 years, their commitment and sacrifice – in too many cases a final sacrifice – helped our country become safer and stronger. While many Americans continue to pursue public service careers, I have gradually grown concerned that fewer and fewer are choosing that path, a trend that could lead to a national security crisis of its own. We need highly qualified and motivated people to enter public service and perform increasingly specialized roles.

Several factors are contributing to dampened enthusiasm for public service. War weariness, the financial crisis, declining faith in institutions and a highly charged political climate top the list. This trend remains worrying and, in a strict national security sense, needs to be addressed. But I have also come to appreciate that notions of service have evolved, and at least some of the reluctance is rooted in transformational – and ultimately positive – shifts in what service looks like.

First, the lines between the public and private sectors have blurred considerably. Both need each other more than ever. On many issues, including cybersecurity, international trade and financial regulation, companies are looking to governments to offer clarity on the rules of the road.

43
PERCENT
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solutions

Source: Brunswick Insight

Governments also need companies, desperately in many cases, to help them keep pace with the latest innovations. This explains, for instance, the US Department of Defense's recent establishment of a liaison office to engage more closely with technology companies in Silicon Valley. Public-private partnerships have become the go-to forum for addressing complex issues.

Second, as political institutions in the US and elsewhere face an ongoing trust deficit, many companies are stepping up to solve problems that were once the purview of government. Whether confronting challenges to the environment, training veterans for jobs after the military, or exploring new frontiers in space, many are looking to corporations for answers rather than to Washington. In a 2016 Brunswick Insight survey (Page 17), less than half of respondents in the US felt government was effective at providing solutions.

Finally, even as national loyalties remain strong throughout the world, many people seem to be seeking opportunities for service that transcend borders. The potential to have global impact – and to do so early in one's career – can be a strong service motivator. Since government organizations generally do not offer this kind of reward, corporations – especially multinationals – provide a wider berth for those seeking to serve.

Though the talent shortage governments face today is worrying, the upshot is there are more opportunities than ever before to contribute to the common good beyond traditional definitions of "public service." Companies able to harness these changing attitudes toward service, and embrace the enthusiasm of new generations of workers, stand to improve their reputation, distinguish themselves in the competition for elite talent, and give their employees the personal fulfillment that comes from connecting their work to a larger purpose.

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