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APEX ORIENTATION PROGRAM SOFITEL HOTEL – WASHINGTON, DC

*Remarks as Delivered by Inspector General Joseph E. Schmitz of the Department of Defense: “Introducing a New Order of Things,”
Washington, DC, Thursday, March 25, 2004.*

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning and welcome.

There is a simple rule that all breakfast speakers must follow.

Assuming that 40 percent of people are “morning people,” that 40 percent of people operate better at night, and that 20 percent of people will pay no attention to a speech no matter what is said, morning or night, the breakfast speaker must leave his audience with one and only one key point.

It must be easily grasped and difficult to forget.

It is a daunting challenge, and, as I am sure all of you know, one that few breakfast speakers succeed in meeting.

And so before I go on, I would like to invite all of you to please feel free to fill up your coffee cups with the very expensive Jamaica Blue Mountain Coffee that we brought in specially this morning to make your training experience a truly first-class event.

As senior managers in government, you will be overseeing large programs, budgets, and systems.

But the most important asset you will be managing, regardless of your field, will be people.

And so it would behoove managers of people to understand human nature.

To understand human nature, one must turn to perhaps the greatest dissector of human nature in modern history—Niccoló Machiavelli.

Yes, it's true, although many may wish to resist his tone and his ethics, just listen to this insight, and see if you disagree.

Machiavelli writes:

[quote] “There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than *to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things*. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm (indifferent, uninterested) defenders in those who may do well under the new. ” [unquote]

Now, because this is the breakfast hour, and because I know that some of you did not take advantage of the free Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee, let me repeat one of the key phrases in this observation:

“to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.”

I think you will agree that introducing a new order of things, especially within the bureaucracy of government, is a very difficult task indeed.

After all, even so formidable a figure as Secretary Donald Rumsfeld—my boss—neither always gets his way, nor fully succeeds in introducing “a new order of things” within the Pentagon—as attentive readers of the *Washington Post* may have observed over the past three years.

As new senior managers, you may soon find yourselves falling into two distinct categories of leaders.

At the beginning of your assignment, you will likely be among those striving valiantly to introduce “a new order of things.”

But after a certain period of time, you may very well find yourself in a distinctly different category, among those most fervently resisting the introduction of “a new order of things.”

You will go from innovators to determined defenders of the status quo.

I cannot say in the abstract whether this is a good or a bad thing, but it does appear to be some kind of law of human nature.

Stated differently, it is an extremely difficult task to change the culture of an organization.

Take, for example, a high school environment where academic success is ridiculed and denigrated by the vast majority of students.

This is all too common in inner city schools—and even in suburban schools where you might expect to find the opposite.

Principals who have been trying to “introduce a new order of things” in such schools—to change the culture to a more wholesome learning environment—have far too often labored, sometimes for decades, in vain.

Or take the example of what constitutes acceptable behavior in the workplace in terms of sexual harassment or racism.

Changes in those cultures have not been results achieved overnight—and there’s still room for improvement.

Or take, for example, the efforts in our armed forces to make physical fitness part of the Navy and Air Force culture in the same way that it defines the Marine Corps and the Army.

The Navy has been trying to do that for decades, but we still see too many overweight Sailors who simply do not embrace personal physical fitness as an important part of their warfighting—or peacekeeping—missions.

This enduring challenge reminds me of something I read just this last week in a book called, *The Heart of a Champion*, by pole-vaulting legend Bob Richards (some of you are old enough to remember Bob Richards as the Wheaties guy—remember “Breakfast of Champions.” What you did not know was that the gold-medal athlete was also an author).

Richards writes:

[quote] "I've come home from three Olympics convinced that one of the reasons why America does so well is because America's young men and women are disciplined in terms of cutting out of their lives those things that keep them from really going to the top.

"Is not this a great principle for all of living? The people who will really accomplish great things in life are those who are willing to discipline their lives, who maintain their health, their vitality, their efficiency through this process of rigorous disciplining in what they take into their bodies and what they do in life. It's a very important thing, in terms of championship living."¹ [unquote]

A culture of competitive excellence is what Bob Richards is after, and in that kind of culture, attitude is key—if not everything.

Now let's take the example of a Wall Street executive who operates in an environment where cutting ethical corners is, if not the norm, generally condoned: especially if cutting such corners translates into lots and lots of money.

Changes in the law are one thing; changing the culture is a far more difficult undertaking.

The lesson in Machiavelli's observation is this: you will not succeed in introducing "a new order of things" unless you change people's incentives and, ultimately, their attitudes.

And that is where the senior manager must sometimes be creative; for he is often limited in the incentives and disincentives he can offer.

In government, the ability to hire and fire with great flexibility, to raise or cut salaries based on merit and results, and to assign or to withhold promotions does not exist to anywhere near the same degree as what we find in the private sector.

¹ Bob Richards, *THE HEART OF A CHAMPION* 81 (1959).

But that principal who is trying to change the culture of his school, and that Navy Commanding Officer who is trying to change the culture of his ship, and that senior manager who is trying to change the culture in his office can, on occasion, achieve astonishing results.

That is your challenge, and you must meet it because you are leaders.

There are certain fundamentals of leadership to which you must adhere.

You will each have a mission statement, and you must direct all your energies towards changing the culture so as to best carry out that mission, given the current environment and circumstances.

More important than a clear mission statement, as leaders you must also have your own vision statement. Vision-focused results are the “schtuff” of good leadership.

Change small things.

The small things send out powerful signals that change is afoot.

People may not know exactly what changes are coming, but they will immediately see that change is coming.

Get your people off their butts!

Sometimes this is the primary problem, and the leader must demonstrate through example that doing things the old, comfortable way is no longer acceptable.

Change routines.

You must show in concrete ways that you are changing things.

Do not change merely for the sake of change, of course, but do remember that changes must be made if the old order of things is not producing the results it should.

Get people talking to each other.

Break down those barriers of communication—those stovepipes—that prevent bureaucracies from operating efficiently.

Do have social events, encourage new relationships to form, and cultivate a sense of teamwork.

Find out what you can do to trigger the desired changes you want, and set a personal example by leading the way.

Senior managers must be aware of, and must spend a great deal of time thinking about what changes need to be made, and how to change incentives so that desired behavior is rewarded and negative habits of the established order are discouraged.

As breakfast speaker, I hope that my primary task has been achieved, and that at the end of the day, after many slide presentations, speeches, and cups of Jamaica Blue Mountain Coffee, you will all remember what Machiavelli can tell us about introducing “a new order of things”—and why it is so important for leadership and results.

Here it is one last time:

“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than *to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things*. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm (indifferent, uninterested) defenders in those who may do well under the new. ”

Thank you, take courage, and good luck.