

Anh Duong, director of Borders and Maritime Security

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The nonprofit Partnership for Public Service and The Washington Post's On Leadership site jointly produce the Federal Coach, hosted by Tom Fox, director of the partnership's Center for Government Leadership. The goal is to "engage, inspire and learn from you, the federal worker, whether you are a new hire, a contractor or a manager at the highest level."

Please share your ideas and questions by e-mailing me at fedcoach@ourpublicservice.org.

Anh Duong is the director of the Borders and Maritime Security division in the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate. Previously, Duong was director of Science and Technology at the Naval Surface Warfare Center's Indian Head Division, where she developed the thermobaric bomb. As a teenager, Duong and her family came to the United States as refugees during the Vietnam War.

What advice do you have for emerging federal leaders?

Understand your strengths and weaknesses. However, spend more time building on your strengths rather than correcting for your weaknesses. It's like a card game. You win by knowing how to capitalize on your aces. As to your weaknesses, it depends. If it's a skill, take training or get work experience. But often it's truly just the way we're wired, so instead of agonizing over them, find ways to compensate.

For example, I used to be too task-oriented. So I found a colleague who was totally people-oriented and made her my deputy. I told Pamela, "Hey, in meetings, can you sit next to me, and when I come across too cold or unfeeling, just kick me under the table?" Well, the first week I came home bruised. One day Pam said, "You know, I didn't have to kick you once this week." That's what I call compensating for weaknesses.

When you talk with young women, what advice do you have for them?

I get asked a lot about how to handle prejudice being a woman and a minority. My number one advice is to not take it personally. You can't win if you take it personally. In the workplace, you don't need to be liked by everyone, but you need to be respected. There's nothing I can do to change if someone dislikes me because of my race or gender. But I can still earn that person's respect through my work ethic and output.

What are the challenges being a female leader in a male dominated arena?

I've run into difficulties working with men because of my gender. But being a minority has its advantages too. For example, I have a much easier time trying to stand out in a professional crowd or being memorable because of my physical appearance. That's already half of the battle. It is also easy to exceed someone's expectations when I am underestimated in the first place. Rather than feeling insulted or indignant, I remind myself how gratifying the ultimate win will be!

How do you get your key people to work together?

First, I inspire them to work together by making sure that they have a shared vision. Second, I have to make sure that they know how to work together. So roles, responsibilities, inter-dependencies and the rules of engagement must be clearly defined and understood. And then last but not least, I also watch

out for what we call the why not -- the possible barriers that might keep people from working together -- so I can address them proactively.

How do you motivate your staff?

I believe that attitude comes first, then aptitude, then altitude. I spend a lot of time cultivating my staff's attitude toward me, our organization and ultimately our mission. This includes demonstrating to them that I'm willing and able to fight for them when necessary. If you believe that your boss has your back, you will be willing to go the extra mile. Last but not least, they all want to be autonomous, informed about the "big picture" and how they connect to that picture. My goal is for everyone to have their own "kingdom" with clearly understood boundaries. The pride of ownership is important as long as we don't go to the extreme of parochialism.

How did your childhood experience fleeing Vietnam affect you as a leader?

I came to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War as a refugee. Because of that, I feel deeply indebted to the South Vietnamese and American soldiers who fought and died for my freedom, and the generous, compassionate Americans who took my family in and helped us through the darkest moment of our lives. I want to pay back by devoting my entire career serving this great nation and the people who have adopted us. Because of that, I have a strong conviction for our mission and because of that strong conviction, I lead with compassion.

This land is a paradise, relatively speaking. Usually when you're born in paradise, you don't know it's a paradise. It is the responsibility of newcomers like me to remind us that freedom is not free and that we are very much privileged to be Americans.