

Looking for Ariadne's Thread: Greece's Public Service Workforce in Transition

By By Panagiotis Karkatsoulis, Alex Pattakos and Efi Stefopoulou

ACCORDING TO GREEK MYTHOLOGY, Theseus, a young Athenian, volunteered to slay the Minotaur creature housed within the Cretan labyrinth. Worried he would be hurt and unable to find his way out, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, gave Theseus a ball of thread so he would be able to retrace his path out of the labyrinth. Today, we refer to "Ariadne's Thread" as finding the common thread or solution to a complex problem.

Famously known as the birthplace of Western civilization and the "cradle of democracy," Greece provides the setting for powerful and meaningful myths. It is against this backdrop that Greek public administration finds itself today. But, its public service workforce remains trapped within a labyrinth of its own making, with no Theseus to come to the rescue and no Ariadne to help guide the way out. Much like the Cretan labyrinth, there appear to be multiple ways of proceeding and no simple, straightforward solution. All available routes must be examined.

For several years, it has been fashionable for the media and others to paint Greece's public sector in the most negative light. We are sensitive to judgments cast by the outside world, but we also see potential for strengthening the Greek public service workforce on multiple levels—from individual initiative, to civil service reform, and even political overhaul. Some of these routes require deliberate action; others will come naturally from the seeds of creative destruction.

When it comes to Greek public administration, governments from the 1980s onward resorted to the strategic option of systematically expanding the public sector through a peculiar definition that included both a narrow public sector and a wider public sector. The former included ministries, local governments and entities operating under public law, while the latter included

entities supervised by the state but operating under private law.

Making use of the different employment contracts available under the private law, these "public" entities frequently served as hiring hubs for partisan clientele. In this way, many people entered the wider public sector under differentiated employment statuses; the total number almost doubled during the 1980s compared to the previous 30-year period when its size remained relatively stable. The population re-doubled once more in the subsequent 20-year period.

Despite growth in the narrow and wider public sectors, the overall size of the Greek public workforce—that is, civil servants as a percentage of the total workforce—remained near the average size of public sector employment of OECD countries. Likewise, Greece's payroll expenses for civil servants, expressed both as a percentage of the state budget and of GDP, did not exceed the OECD country average, even with the increase in public sector size.

The Crisis' Impact

It is not just a matter of the number and relative size of public sector positions. There is the human side, especially given the formidable challenges that have plagued Greece in recent years. The austerity policies laid out in the memorandum between the Troika and the Greek governments since 2010 have dramatically impacted human capital.

Without preparations for a minimum social safety net for laid off civil servants, social problems emerged, adding to or worsening financial and social problems that already existed. Many skilled executives rushed toward any alternative lifelines they could find, including pension schemes, as salaries were reduced almost in half. Those who remained in the public service found themselves demoralized by the ongoing

public discourse that stigmatized civil servants as the root of all evil. Many lost their motivation and reduced their level of engagement. Those relatively new to the public sector became discouraged because of the limited possibilities for a fulfilling career path.

Unfinished reforms, such as performance assessment of agencies and persons, restructuring for better efficiency and enhancement of the strategic character of the ministries, were stuck at the outset of their implementation. Some reforms were abandoned due to resource and political constraints. Others deemed useful or necessary, such as decentralization and program-based budgeting, remain pending for similar reasons. But, moral crusades, punitive policies and quasi-reforms, such as the nominal restructuring or shuffling of ministerial units, always seem to be implemented, even at the risk of worsening, not helping, the situation.

Perceptions that civil servants were the root of the crisis, austerity measures imposed disproportionately on the public sector workforce and announced but unimplemented reforms combined to break the bonds of trust between public administration and the Greek political system. The pursuit of excellence in public service is difficult to achieve without trust, authentic collaboration and innovation.

So, what are the options for strengthening the Greek public service workforce? The first and most direct route is to start from scratch. For meaningful human capital development to take hold and deliver results, there must be a compelling vision for the Greek state, its role in society and the economy, and the significance of those working for it. This vision should reflect and be deeply rooted in traditional Greek public administration principles and values, such as patriotism, honor,

devotion to duty and social solidarity.

Absent a complete overhaul, an alternative if less direct route is to leverage the human capital and talent that already exist. Our functional review of the Greek public service workforce found that many civil servants strongly support public sector reforms in meaningful ways. They believe that reform is the only path to building a more effective and efficient public administration and guaranteeing the public sector's sustainability.

This "inside out" reform process must stem from the "core of meaning." There is ample evidence to suggest that the search for meaning is a primary source of intrinsic motivation. Take, for instance, the unofficial networking and communication bridges built among civil servants to achieve results and overcome obstacles set by official regulations, statements and bureaucratic hierarchies. Against overwhelming odds, Greek civil servants have set aside organizational and operational shortcomings by summoning knowledge, sensitivity and appreciation for both citizens and entrepreneurs. They have demonstrated that unity and commitment can lead to administrative solidarity, interorganizational coordination and more effective innovation management.

A meaning-focused reform/capacity-building process offers Greek civil servants the opportunity to better understand their role within the larger system. It increases and sustains their level of engagement, builds their resilience to change, fosters their state of health and well being, improves their performance and unleashes their creativity. They have much more potential than realized or reported in the press. When inspiration and leadership are cultivated, when coordination and support are guaranteed, and when even

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Preparing Our Veterans for Civilian Life in the Public Sector

By Monique M. Maldonado

MILITARY REDUCTIONS, through either voluntary or involuntary separation, has raised uncertainty for thousands of airmen in the U.S. Air Force. Four months ago, then-Acting Secretary of the Air Force Eric Fanning reported, "Over the next five years, the service needs to eliminate as many as 25,000 airmen slots, a reduction that's being driven by the mandatory budget cuts known as sequestration."

In 2013, the federal government experienced a prolonged shutdown and federal agencies experienced drastic reductions in their budgets as a result of sequestration's automatic cuts. It led to downsizing across all service departments of the military. Airmen already had been working more with less. Now, they were forced to be even more creative, working with the lowest resource levels the department had ever experienced. The transition of military members became even more important with the expected layoffs.

As individuals separate or retire from the military, how do they integrate into civilian society? Programs assist members in transitioning into the civilian workforce, but how smooth and successful are those transitions? Are we really taking care of our veterans? Are we restoring hope that they will be able to function and find work beyond the war zone?

According to *Stars and Stripes*, "Two-thirds of new veterans say they faced a difficult transition into civilian life...." This was attributed to the stagnant economy and high levels of unemployment. The process for voluntary and involuntary separation adds to this difficulty for airmen.

Take my situation. An active duty Air Force member, I was listed on the 2014 Air Force Retention Board, which meant that I was eligible for involuntary or voluntary separation due to my rank, time in service and influx of airmen in my career field.

In January 2014, I was notified that I could request to stay in the Air Force, but that a board would determine whether I could remain or be forced to separate. Fortunately, my name was removed from the list for this fiscal year, as my rank and experience were needed. I am relieved, but it does not mean I am safe next year. There still is a sense of panic, fear and ambiguity; no matter how many degrees or how much experience I have, if there are no jobs, there are no jobs.

Are Service Members Prepared?

Service members should not feel uncertain about entering civilian life if they are properly advised on transitioning out of the military. Services like the Transition Assistance Program, as explained on its website, was "established to meet the needs of separating service members during their period of transition into civilian life by offering job-search assistance and related services." Military members must participate in this mandatory program, usually 12 to six months prior to their separation or retirement.

Tom Tarantino, policy associate with Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, reported that military members were not getting the proper assistance when looking for jobs in the civilian sector. As a result, they did not feel prepared for the process. One can speculate about gaps in the system given recurring reports from airmen, marines, seamen, and soldiers who feel they are not ready to transition to civilian life.

What's Being Done?

Some state legislatures, like Alaska, have passed legislation to provide assistance to military members to transition into the civilian workforce. This legislation provides that trainings, certifications and other licensing or specialties earned in the military can be applied to resumes and applications for civilian positions.

In 2013, the Executive Office of the President provided guidance in a

document entitled, *The Fast Track to Civilian Employment: Streamlining Credentialing and Licensing for Service Members, Veterans, and their Spouses*. The guide identifies unique challenges that service members, veterans and spouses face when they are preparing qualifications for civilian employment. Under this guidance, President Obama established the Department of Defense Military Credentialing and Licensing Taskforce to "focus efforts on well-paying industries and occupations that have a high demand for skilled workers." The report concluded that 28 states have passed legislation on spousal licensing to make it easier for families to succeed in post-military life. This is a step in the right direction, but there should be consistency and stability across the states as veterans try to find work.

The Future of the Military and the Civilian Workforce

The transition stage is one of the most critical phases of starting a new chapter for airmen and other members of the

Armed Service branches. Following years of defending and protecting the U.S. Constitution, it is ironic that there is such ambiguity about the success of finding a job in civilian society. Job security once was a great advantage of the military, but that often seems to be a distant memory. When members separate or retire from the military, they often are young enough to have a second career. Many still have families to support. Helping veterans transition is not a matter of giving "special treatment" to service members. Rather, it provides certainty to those who put their lives on the line and made sacrifices for Americans' protection and freedom.

Monique M. Maldonado is a U.S. Air Force active duty service member and adjunct professor. She teaches in the School of Graduate and Degree Completion Programs in the Department of Criminal Justice at Tiffin University. A doctoral candidate in the Public Policy and Administration field at Walden University, she is an ASPA member. She can be reached at maldonadom@tiffin.edu.

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minimal incentives are provided, the public service workforce can and will perform.

The Greek experience provides many lessons for civil servants in other countries, including the United States. Although they may not be facing the intense public scrutiny and criticism or dealing with an unsettling political, economic and social/cultural environment, strengthening the public service workforce comes down to the same leadership challenge: leading with and to the core of meaning. No matter how well intended, layering changes on any kind of social system without a fundamental understanding of human motivation is futile. Meaning

is the solution and the Ariadne's Thread that we have been looking for all along.

Panagiotis Karkatsoulis, recipient of ASPA's 2012 International Public Administration Award, and Efi Stefopoulou are policy analysts with the Institute for Regulatory Policy Research, Athens, Greece. Former ASPA National Council Member Alex Pattakos is a political scientist and co-founder of The Meaning Group. He can be reached at aleko@theopaway.com.