

## **WHY THE MIDDLE IS THE ANSWER**

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Years ago, I had two friends who had an argument. If you talked to the first one, you came away thinking that the other one was completely wrong. If you talked to the second one, you came away believing that the first one was all wrong. It was really difficult to try to help resolve the differences until I began to understand that the truth was somewhere in the middle. Both parties were so entrenched in the belief that they were right that both of them were putting forward some truths, some untruths or half-truths, exaggerations, etc. Once I accepted that fact, it was easier to work around it.

Politics today is much the same way. The left despises the right. The right despises the left. There is not a lot of collaboration or work toward the common good. The bumper stickers I see all over New York State about repealing the Secure Ammunition and Firearms Enforcement (SAFE) Act is a good example. There is no middle ground on this issue for some people.

How do we work around this when the issues are even larger, such as workforce development, jobs, and economic development across all of New York State? How do we not get mired in the arguments, bureaucracy, and political stands, and make some progress?

I work for a small non-profit—the Workforce Development Institute (WDI)—that tries very hard to stay in the middle and do just

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that. It's difficult in New York State, but not impossible. This particular non-profit is aligned with organized labor. While much of what we do is influenced by our alignment with labor, the bulk of our work is non-union-related and spans a wide range of projects, all focused on filling gaps in the current New York State workforce development system, and then moving programs that work well across the state. Our goals and policies have been established with a “middle-of-the-road” feel, or, just enough procedures to ensure good management, but enough wiggle room to be able to provide assistance on a wide variety of workforce-related issues.

When I started at this non-profit, I was new to the New York State system and to the small non-profit system that is beholden to state and federal grants and contracts for survival. I was amazed and often frustrated by the obstacles we faced simply to do business. Bureaucracy and a lack of coordination among agencies seemed to be around every corner. The bureaucratic “this is the way we've always done things” way of thinking can be found everywhere, not just in government agencies. I believe strongly in the union movement when it works well, but we do see unions losing membership, in part, due to that “no change” mentality. The work environment today has changed since the days when unions first took hold in New York State, and the union movement needs to change with it.

I've learned—largely through the people I've worked with over the years—how to make things work and use some advantages of the small non-profit to stand out and help move the bar a little higher for all. Along the way, my own views on politics and collaboration have shifted. I feel more strongly that the moderate middle is the place where progress happens, and that we all need to step back and look at the bigger picture more often.

### **My Harvard Background—A Learning Experience**

My experience at the WDI has been an eye-opener. I came to New York State after 15 years at Harvard Medical School (HMS), where I started as a junior financial analyst and ended as the Director of Financial Operations and Analysis.

I have always considered myself very fortunate, for a few reasons, to have landed my first job at HMS. First, the HMS environment was much more complicated—both programmatically and financially—than what I had anticipated. HMS was not just a medical school, but had various lines of business that all required very different types of planning and management, so I was exposed to a wide variety of business and planning problems. Second, and probably more importantly, I found myself working in a “matrix” environment, reporting to any number of administrative leaders—the Director of Financial Analysis, the Dean for Finance, the Dean for Planning, the Dean for Facilities and Operations—depending on the project. All of these administrators were hired by, and reported to, the Executive Dean for Management and Administration, who was a force to be reckoned with. This particular dean was very smart and loved to play the role of devil’s advocate on virtually every topic. His goal was to ensure that all possible avenues had been thought through and vetted thoroughly before a final proposal was put forth. This dean set a tone for excellence that trickled down to all levels of administration and forced us to think critically about everything we did. No one wanted to be caught unprepared or be unable to answer questions in front of him. The result was that HMS was light-years ahead of the other Harvard schools (or any school, I would argue) in terms of management and administration. I worked extremely hard during these years—late nights and most weekends—but was happy to do so, as I always felt that I had been given opportunities right from the start that I would not have received elsewhere. I learned a tremendous amount during these years on a variety of topics—critical thinking, writing, presenting, understanding which facts matter and when, prioritizing, collaborating, etc. Although the job was in the Finance Department, my job went far beyond the financial realm. I never thought only about the finances. Rather, I learned the importance of the program first, how the financial plan could support it, and how a change in one area of the school could have ripple effects elsewhere. I learned how this large, complicated puzzle that was Harvard Medical School fit together. I became a “resident expert” on all

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things related to finance and planning. It was a hard job—extremely demanding for 15 years—but also very rewarding and I truly liked the environment and the people with whom I worked.

Compared to my work at WDI later on, HMS was quite different in a number of ways. For one thing, there were significant resources at HMS. During my 15 years there, I worked under two different but progressive deans. When the dean had an idea and wanted to move on something, we had the resources and the administrative team to do it and to do it well. Occasionally, there were some issues that took longer to address but, for the most part, if the dean or his advisers wanted something to happen, it did. New curricula were developed. Buildings were built. Departments were merged and new departments created. Faculty was recruited from around the world and initiatives were launched. When I look back at all the significant changes that occurred at HMS during my 15 years there, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to be a part of it. Again, we had the resources, the initiative, and the know-how. And the administrative team was just that—a team. We were successful in moving projects forward.

While even Harvard Medical School had financial problems that had to be managed, overall, I was relatively insulated from issues such as cash flow (the University managed the cash for all its Schools) and government contracts taking months to be finalized (the university simply bore the risk and responsibility until the contracts were finalized and cash came through).

During my years in Boston, I considered myself very much on the political left. I am the daughter of an English professor. I lived and worked in a very liberal city for 15 years. I did not understand the issues raised by the right regarding government bureaucracy or the “business first” attitude at all.

I left HMS by choice after I had twins later in life. When my twins turned three I realized I wanted to move back to New York State to be closer to family, and that perhaps the demanding job I had held for years was too much to manage while raising twin toddlers. I left Boston without a job lined up in New York State,

but with the idea that I would perhaps work at something not as demanding. I distinctly remember my boss telling me that I would never find another work environment like the one I was leaving. I agreed with her but was not worried about it, since it was a slower pace of life that I was after.

### **An Eye-Opener-WDI**

I found my job at WDI by answering a blind newspaper ad. The ad noted that an unnamed non-profit was looking for a finance director to manage a growing budget. That was all I knew about the position. When I was interviewed, I remember being concerned that I might be bored here, after having managed a very complicated \$300 million budget. By contrast, the WDI budget was small, and seemed relatively straightforward. However, I also remember the executive director telling me that he had narrowed the final candidates to two individuals. The first was a “meat and potatoes” finance professional who would see to it that everything was taken care of in terms of finance, but likely would not expand beyond a strictly financial role. The second was me. He explained very clearly that he wanted to grow the organization in different ways and define a role for WDI within New York State, and for that he needed someone who would help him plan and grow the company, operating outside of a financial role. If I was interested in this role, then I would be his candidate. I accepted the role. And while I had worried about being bored, what I found was a host of new and different challenges and learning experiences that I had never encountered at HMS.

My initial year at WDI was quite an eye-opener, particularly in terms of understanding the bureaucracy involved in getting money to show up on time. Putting projects on hold and waiting for contracts to wend their way through the state system became the norm. Cash took forever to come through. Vendors were asked to wait, and they complained. We looked bad as a business because we could not pay those we owed on time and almost missed making our own payroll more than once. I remember venting to my boss about the State taking forever to pay what they owed, and I remember being floored

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when he commented that “we would not be the first non-profit that went under waiting for the State to pay.”

Add to this the learning experience I had around the New York State workforce and economic development systems themselves. It seemed that we were constantly learning of inequities, negative incentives, and the ineffectiveness of large and unconnected bureaucracies. I remember asking, naively, why economic development was separate from workforce development. Other questions followed. Why were there no repercussions when a company received 10 years of tax breaks, then promptly moved at the 10-year mark? Why was there no understanding of implications (loss of income taxes, loss of local spending, increases to unemployment) around the use of local versus out-of-state labor for building projects? Why were there so many rules and regulations around grants available for businesses that it was virtually impossible for any small- or medium-sized business to apply? Why did some of the community colleges and Workforce Investment Boards seem so far removed from the employers whom they were supposed to be serving?

And then there were issues around support for the workers. At Harvard, our Human Resources (HR) Department tracked very carefully when a department started to bump up against the six-month mark when using temporary services. I remember well the mantra of the HR director: “If someone starts looking and smelling like an employee, it’s time to convert them and give them benefits.” So then why did we see so many companies making use of long-term temporary services, denying higher pay and benefits to individuals who “looked and smelled” like employees?

At first I thought that maybe I wasn’t fully understanding the issues. Now I know that I was understanding the issues, and that my Harvard experience had, in fact, trained me to ask all the right questions. The answer, however, was that nothing was happening to address the issues. Also, I began to understand that the answers, just like in my HMS experience, were not always black and white. Just because something may not make perfect sense financially, it may still make sense to move forward on it if the programmatic

implications could have significant pay-off down the road. I began to see that perhaps changes around the edges could help lead to larger changes. I also began to understand how a small non-profit such as the WDI can help facilitate some of these changes. However, sometimes there need to be some compromises around how to do that.

### **How to Make a Difference? Resourceful Policies and Recognition That the Answers Are Not Black or White**

My experience at WDI has shifted my thinking on a number of issues. Primarily, I've come to understand that it's not all about business and it's not all about the worker; it's a combination. Policy should not be focused on one or the other, but on both at the same time. The end result will likely be some sort of middle-ground—not ideal to either side, but a compromise.

I think a common mistake on the part of government, large corporations, and unions is that they don't pay enough attention to what is occurring on the ground. Information is collected, but is often interpreted incorrectly. Too much attention is paid to formulating incredibly restrictive guidelines, so that responses are so inflexible they're not helpful, and sometimes even backfire. Often, responses target one particular group without a lot of thought about the impact to others.

So how has WDI, a small non-profit, made a difference in a system that seems polarized and rigid? The answers include a curious staff who are encouraged to think outside the box, ground-level (street) information, a flexibility of resources, responsiveness and a lack of complexity, and the ability to make connections. I give my boss credit for repeatedly hammering these points home. The result is that, for a small agency, we make a large impact.

### **Curious and Open-minded Staff**

WDI's executive director has always maintained that hiring good staff is paramount. We're a small entity, so one bad recruit can hamper what we do. As such, we take recruiting seriously, and the screening process for new staff is probably the only area where we

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have a tendency to go through a laborious process. Staff must be curious (with a capital “C”) about how things work, and how programs and resources might fit together. One of WDI’s strengths is that we’ve recruited curious extroverts who make it their business to scan news articles, attend meetings, talk to a variety of individuals, and then “pound the pavement” within their regions to gather more information about company plans and workforce issues. The staff is good at collecting information about what is happening in their respective regions that might impact workforce development. It’s interesting to note that several of our regional staff members have extensive union backgrounds that initially scared some companies off. In fact, we hired them precisely because they spoke about what they liked and did not like about what they had seen within the union movement, and how they would change things if they could. That ability to be open to new ideas and to want to be helpful is key.

### **Ground-Level Information**

It seems that a lot of state policy requires data, data, and more data. Our perspective on what is happening in a given region comes more from a “boots on the ground” orientation. Data is good, but it needs to be backed up by being out in the field and collecting information anecdotally as well; from employers, non-profits, unions, and others. The ground-level information can either back up or dispel what data might indicate is a “trend”. This, too, I view as a middle-of-the-road approach. One source or the other should not be the be-all and end-all.

### **Flexibility of Resources**

The dollars given to WDI are relatively flexible. In addition, our mission is broad. We are interested in programs that have a positive impact on jobs. This could be job growth, job retention, or job promotion (moving individuals up the career ladder). As a result, we are not hemmed in by the rigidity of many government grant programs. For example, many government programs that deal with job growth are focused only on putting the long-term unemployed to work.



However, jump-starting job growth can happen in many ways. We've had small manufacturers ask for help with equipment or software. Sometimes a relatively small change in the way they do business can help them go after and win additional contracts, and then quickly grow their staff. We've had other companies ask for help with incumbent worker training in order to help move individuals up the career ladder. The baby boomer generation is getting ready to retire and incumbent worker training—or getting individuals ready to take the place of those retiring—is a significant need. By helping a company promote current employees, new positions open up at the junior level, and the result is new job placements. What we've found is that flexibility needs to be built into policy, rather than extreme positions around serving specific groups.

### **Responsiveness and Lack of Complexity**

The WDI has instituted systems, policies, and procedures for a company, union, non-profit, or other entity to apply for help, and also to report back on the outcome of the program. Our system is purposely not overly complicated. Feedback from the field is that the small- or medium-sized company, non-profit, or other entity does not have the resources to devote to a cumbersome grant process. Our goal is to help move programming and have a positive impact on jobs as quickly as possible, and so our systems are designed to accomplish just that. Again, the idea that policies and procedures are necessary, but should be instituted in a way that does not impede action, is more of a “middle-of-the-road” approach. Also, the ability to look at those policies and procedures and adapt them to changes in the field is important. We try hard to do both.

### **Ability to Connect the Dots**

The WDI staff is instructed to be on the lookout for programs that lead to good jobs, not just any jobs. We have a fiduciary responsibility not to invest in programs where individuals are not likely to be successful, or where a company does not treat its workers well. For example, if a company has a very high turnover rate, we want

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to understand why before we devote resources to helping it. Is it the wage? Is it the working conditions? Will we sink dollars into a training program, only to have the staff that has been recruited leave almost immediately?

WDI is not a provider of services, but, rather, a connector, a facilitator, a collaborator, and a funder. Because our staff makes it their business to understand their regions, they are good at identifying trends, connecting companies to resources, and determining what programs will have a positive impact on good jobs. We have no ulterior motives, other than to help grow good jobs in New York State.

### Bottom Line

The bottom line in all of this is that we try very hard to understand both sides of the story. The business needs to make a profit, but the worker needs to earn a living wage. There has been a lot in the national media about the loss of middle-class America and the growth of the very wealthy and the working-poor classes. The return of jobs that pay better—manufacturing and certain service-sector jobs—is a real possibility if we use our resources and direct policy wisely. We are at a crossroads here. Businesses need help, but they should not get it at the expense of the working individual. WDI makes a difference by investing in programs and directing programs that have a positive impact on both the company and the individual. The understanding that there are two sides to every story is incredibly important to what we do, and why we have been successful.

As for my own personal journey, it's interesting that the two organizations at which I've spent the bulk of my career are so different in terms of mission and wealth, but alike in other ways. Both pushed staff to think differently, to reflect on what you're doing before doing it, and to remember to "see the forest through the trees." The result—at least in terms of shaping my own thinking—is that it often moves me to a middle ground on fiscal and program issues.

I remember interviewing a candidate for a WDI regional director position, who noted during the interview that, "If someone has a very different opinion from me, I try to take a step back and ask

some questions about it. I try to put myself in that person's shoes. I try to understand how that person views the problem, and why." He got the job.