My 10 Commandments for Economists Who Counsel Politicians

by Don Paarlberg

IV. Be Sure Your Boss Wants An Honest Job. If he doesn’t; and you are a principled person, you should quit. You will be quite unhappy if you do not.

V. Anticipate, Probe and Be Objective. Try to anticipate issues and research them before they become emotional. It is difficult to do good research in the white heat of controversy. It is better to break new trails than to sift the ashes of campfires laid by others. Don’t sulk if your principal rejects your counsel or seeks a second opinion.

Some subjects are not researchable because they are politically sensitive or because adequate research methods are not available. But these limits are not as restrictive as most people think, and they keep changing. Keep probing and challenging to find the new limits. When you find them, respect them. In choosing a method, use as a criterion the usefulness of the results rather than the professional prestige of the technique.

Try to be objective. Objectivity does not mean steering midway between rival views; it means steering toward your objective, which should be the truth. If this gives more comfort to one party rather than to another, so be it. Don’t profess to be without value judgments; there is no such thing. If there were, they would be unfair to do responsible research. Know your values, and let them be known to others. Respect the right of other people to their value judgments. Recall that what may seem a conflict of testimony may in fact be evidence of the many-sidedness of truth.

VI. Do Not Be Rigid. It is better to be resilient than to be either rigid or relaxed. Research should be done in a spirit of inquiry, and the essence of inquiry is that it is not sure of the answers.

VII. Do Not Malign The Bureaucracy. What today may seem like obesity by others may tomorrow help you bridge over what would otherwise be a catastrophic error. If at all possible, trust your subordinates, knowing that trust tends to engender trustworthiness. At the same time, don’t allow yourself to be captured by your subordinates—or by your boss. You don’t owe total loyalty to either. Don’t be surprised if your relationships, both up and down the bureaucracy, turn out to involve a tautalizing combination of exasperation and affection. This is the norm, not the aberration.

VIII. Do Not Impugn A Person’s Motives. How can you know other people’s motives? You are not in their skins. You can’t even be sure of your own motives. Remember President Eisenhower’s counsel: “If you have a difference with a person, allow him a way to retreat with honor. Remember, a person’s honor is his proudest possession, and if you frame an issue so that his honor is at stake, you leave him no choice but to fight you with every weapon at his command. There is no good reason to make your battles that tough.”

IX. Communicate Well. Respect deadlines. A perfect report, oral or written, received after the deadline is useless. Remember that the purpose of your report is to help the recipient, not to impress your colleagues or to save your own skin.

Be brief. The relationship between length of the report and recipient’s interest is best described by a curve that has a negative slope and is steep, approaching the baseline as an asymptote. Use plain language.

The best counsel on communication was given by the Apostle Paul nearly 2000 years ago: “Unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken?”

X. In Special Cases Disregard the Above. Doing economic studies and providing economic counsel in a political environment is too complex an undertaking to be always governed by this set of rules or any other. Honor these rules as you do the rules that govern parking—sometimes in the breach but most often in the observance.

Don Paarlberg is Professor Emeritus, Purdue University.

In the next issue of CHOICES, Don Paarlberg will share another list of principles. What administrators and executives should expect (and not expect) from economists.