

Don Paarlberg's Viewpoint

My 10 Commandments for Economists Who Counsel Politicians

by Don Paarlberg

For 16 years, I was responsible for conducting economic studies and providing economic counsel to elected and appointed officials of the U.S. Government. In 13 of those years, I was in the Department of Agriculture. In three, I was in the White House. Both posts were intensely political.

Over the years I developed a set of principles to guide my activities as an economic counselor in a political setting. They were based originally on counsel of my former professor, Dr. E. C. Young of Purdue University. I kept these principles in my desk drawer, pulling them out from time to time for reflection and updating.

Above all, these principles were counsel to myself over the years; they served me well. They are perhaps unique to my own needs. However, as I observe other work environments, I increasingly suspect that they may be valuable to *CHOICES* readers who are economists—whether in government or industry or in farm, trade or consumer organization; on a farm, a ranch, or in academia. So I share them with you.

I. Get Your Economics Straight. Nobody expects you to be a political expert. But people do expect you to know your economics. If you are deficient in both, you are in bad shape. Remember: Your job is to be a professional economist—not an amateur politician.

II. Do Not Leak. Report only to your boss. Let him take the bows—and the brickbats. If you leak information, you will soon find that you will not be trusted with the information you need to do your job. Tell the reporters what you legitimately can. If you treat the reporters with respect, they will, in most cases, reciprocate. You have a poor memory, so tell the truth; you can then remember what you said earlier. Cleverness may get you some short-term gains but it will kill you in the end.

III. Do Not Be Overly Concerned With Survival. Survival is a means, not an end. The end is service to the public. If you survive but accomplish little, you are simply occupying space that should be given over to a better, bolder person.

IV. Be Sure Your Boss Wants An Honest Job. If he doesn't, and you are a principled person, you should get out. 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 than to another, so be it. Don't profess to be without value judgments; there is no such person. If there were, they would be unfit 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 too sure of the answers.

VI. Do Not Malign The Bureaucracy. What today may seem like obstinacy 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 tantalizing 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.

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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.