

Book Review

Ted Glenn

Professional Communications in the Public Sector: A Practical Guide

Toronto, Canada: *Canadian Scholars' Press*, 2014

Bobby Siu

Developing Public Policy: A Practical Guide

Toronto, Canada: *Canadian Scholars' Press*, 2014

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It is axiomatic that children must learn to walk before they can run, and that we all must learn our alphabets before we can write words and whole sentences. There is even some evidence that politicians should have some experience in elected office or business executives should have spent time as managers before becoming CEOs. That doesn't mean that some people aren't "quick studies" and it certainly doesn't mean that vast, successful work history in one field isn't of great value and can't be seamlessly transferred to advantage when taking up a responsible position in another. Generally speaking, however, it is helpful either to have *pertinent* experience or, at least, to be willing to undertake a period of instruction as an apprentice in one's chosen trade. That's why lawyers must undergo a year of articling and doctors must complete an internship or a residency before qualifying as a practicing physician or a specialist. It's why bricklayers and plumbers must work as apprentices. In exceptional cases, a poet or novelist may become a fine university president and or a clerk in a patent office may become an unparalleled physicist. It just doesn't happen very often.

To ensure that new recruits straight out of school or people hired from other kinds of jobs are given the best opportunities for success, most employers make sure that they are given a certain amount of "on the job" training. Some may be assigned to a "mentor." There may be orientation programs, voluntary or compulsory professional development programs. At the very least, there might be a thick manual, a thin pamphlet, a sheet of paper or an electronic list of "dos" and "don'ts," so that a new employee who makes too many mistakes and is let go can be told on the way out the door: "You should have read the instructions!"

For new public sector employers and employees, there is another option. At least for one set of inductees, the Canadian Scholars' Press has published two excellent introductions to the public sector: Ted Glenn's *Professional Communications in the Public Sector* and Bobby Siu's *Developing Public Policy*. They are on a list of seventeen "practical guides" that mainly address issues in education, health and social work—the "helping professions. These two, however, are of broad enough scope and interest that they can be highly recommended for "fledgling" public sector professionals or for people changing jobs and requiring a solid practical basis in a new area of activity.

Ted Glenn is Professor and Program Coordinator of Public Administration at Humber College in Toronto and a consultant in organizational learning, organizational development, and public sector capacity-building, in Canada and abroad. His *Professional Communications in the Public Sector* is a first-rate example of a “how-to” instruction guide that will be very useful for people wanting to learn public relations and corporate communications strategies, tactics and techniques. It even includes some cautionary notes on the “swampy zone” between public information and propaganda—a matter of some ethical importance when those tempted to use government communications vehicles for political purposes come to or cross over the increasingly blurred line between public service and partisanship.

In addition to standard but necessary coverage of topics from clarity in writing to specific guides to crafting press releases, media backgrounders and ministerial speeches, this handy little book also gives concrete, sensible and no-nonsense direction about some topics that might not have been emphasized for earlier generations of public servants: helpful pointers on event planning, briefing notes, social media and message management (not to say manipulation) are also available.

Bobby Siu, an Adjunct Professor in the Master of Public Policy, Administration and Law Program at York University (also in Toronto), has close to thirty years of public policy development, program implementation and public administration experience, with specific interests in diversity and employment equity, marketing and social research in both the private and public sectors. His *Developing Public Policy* is a “hands-on” and “grounded” tool kit for people charged with the responsibility of recognizing and resolving public problems within the culture and structure of contemporary government work.

Developing Public Policy chock full of strategies, tactics, guidelines and checklists suitable for entry-level public sector professionals and useful, too, as a refresher in the basics even for people who have been on the job for a longer time. Siu effectively communicates the fact that “developing public policy is both a science and an art.” He emphasizes, among other things, the dual demand that public sector workers understand (and show the necessary patience to function within) democratic traditions, and also display the subtleties of mind “to decipher the implicit interests of stakeholder groups and to understand the political context in which policy topics are being raised.”

Like Glenn’s, the main purpose of Siu’s book is instructional. He wants to show how public sector employees can negotiate the complexities of governance, bureaucracy and public service. It is the subtler and somewhat deeper of the two. Both, however, are commendable “go-to” guides for newcomers. Siu’s, however, carries more important meta-messages of reassurance for people who require the skills to be efficient functionaries, but also effective advocates for innovation in the public interest.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches Cultural Anthropology and Modern Political Thought at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com