

Captain Sara Newman – Seeing Impact Sustains Motivation (Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, USA)

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“I walked in, the date was September 11th, 2001. It's about 9:00 AM.” Sara’s first day on duty would shape her country and the world.

Waiting for her first assignment in an empty office, she was “wondering where the boss is, and I see a group of people in the lobby watching the television. I joined them there. Nobody knows who I am. I haven't been introduced to anybody, so I'm very alone and I watch a plane hit the World Trade Center. It struck me like lightning. I didn't know what I was watching. But somehow, I knew, in some way, that our nation had just hit a point of no return. I felt a sense of calling.” She knew at that moment that she “was going to serve this nation. I had to do something more... I had a duty to serve. I needed to help in a way that I couldn't if I were not wearing this uniform.”

Sara Newman is a member of the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps (Corps). It is one of the eight federal uniformed services in the United States, which makes Sara a uniformed officer, embedded in a federal agency. Sara and her fellow Corps members are on call, 24/7. At a moment's notice she may be called to the front lines of a health emergency.

Monetary sacrifice, a feature of many government jobs, are particularly notable in the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. Officers could opt to serve in a “regular” civil servant position doing the same work and get promoted more quickly without the burden of on-call duty or deployments, but they stay in the Commissioned Corps. Many could make far more outside the service – particularly the corps members with MD or Ph.D. degrees. Staying in spite of lower wages requires “this higher calling and this duty to serve, this feeling of wanting to do something for, in this case perhaps your country.”

Sara thinks motivation is mostly sustained by “the results” that Corps members see and feel themselves. “Knowing we saved lives, knowing we prevented a death, knowing we changed a system, or structure is motivating enough for many of us..”

Sara worries that the value of the Public Health Service Corps’ work isn’t well understood. Sara imagines the public thinking “I’m not really sure what they [the Public Health Service] do, or what value they bring.” She pauses, letting herself envision a world of clarified public impact, “if we could [show] the impact of the work that we do for this nation, it would blow this nation away.”

Mission motivation also comes from colleagues in the workplace. Sara is careful to foster a sense of commitment to the mission and she messages the value of this work to those she works with. Wherever the naysayers come from, Sara’s message to her team is the same: “don’t let that noise bother you – we have really critical work. We keep it science-based, we keep it factual and evidence-based, that’s where we have success.”

She models commitment by sharing her motivation. “I say to them *‘I feel valued every day I put the uniform on because I feel that I serve the people before me. Because I feel that I’m doing something for this nation’*.” She hopes that this helps her staff weather the smaller indignities of the work – and see that promotions and pay raises can only go so far. Sara’s clear on this, too: “that’s not what drives me. It’s this uniform. It’s the people I serve with.”

Sara is the rare Mission Driven Bureaucrat who has also studied mission motivation. As a graduate student at MIT thirty years ago, she co-authored (under her maiden name, Sara Freedheim) with Judith Tandler a groundbreaking study regarding public health in the Brazilian state of Ceará. The study finds “the state created an unusual sense of ‘calling’ among the program’s workers, new prestige in the communities where they worked, and an informed citizenry that both monitored the workers and trusted them.”¹ She remembers the bureaucrats’ perspectives; “they carried tremendous pride as workers for “the state.” The fundamental lessons of her academic work – the power of Mission Driven bureaucrats to be a force for good – have also animated her approach to management.

Leadership is, for Sara, another important tool sustaining motivation. Speaking in 2017, then-President Trump administration’s rhetoric about the “deep state” had brought further challenges, if often more psychological than actual. “I’m not sure if those opinions have trickled down to really stop people [from carrying out the work] or if it’s more created fear.” Sara has also witnessed the inspirational impact that leaders’ actions can have. She reflects that while she enjoys wearing her uniform, it is also seen as a sacrifice within the department of health and human services. When Admiral Brett Giroir, then-lead of the public service Commissioned Corps, decided to wear the Corps uniform, it was a choice. She says, “that was a huge message to me personally – this guy cares... if you’ve committed to wearing the uniform, then you’re now part of us.”

Members who join the Corps because of the mission sometimes do leave if they feel they are not able to make an impact. Sara shares, “I find that officers get dismayed or their motivation kind of wanes when they’re not called [into the field]... That’s partly why they served, to get out there.”

Sara thinks people might be better off leaving if the agency itself loses track of the mission, or if it imposes too many constraints that ultimately prevent the employees from having an impact. This could be “for a variety of reasons: you have a boss who makes everything impossible, or you have an administration that makes things hard; it could be a whole myriad of factors. In your assessment, you’re unhappy because you’re not able to carry out that calling.”

What about those recruits who find the mission doesn’t resonate? Sara has a different message, “Don’t feel that you have to be in here because you have to be in here. We’d rather have people in the Corps who believe in it.” Commitment is so critical that a small, dedicated team would be preferable to a larger, less universally mission motivated one.

¹ Tandler & Freedheim 1994

Luckily for the US Public Health Service, Sara still finds value in the work she is called to do. And she still inspires others to serve its mission because “everyone needs a sense of purpose... [it’s] human nature.”