

Building a Better Government

An Interview with Max Stier, President and Chief Executive Officer, Partnership for Public Service

EDITORS' NOTE Max Stier is the founding president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service. He has worked previously in all three branches of the federal government. In 1982, he served on the personal staff of Congressman Jim Leach. He clerked for Chief Judge James Oakes of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in 1992 and clerked for Justice David Souter of the United States Supreme Court in 1994. Between these two positions, Stier served as Special Litigation



Max Stier

Counsel to Assistant Attorney General Anne Bingaman at the Department of Justice. In 1995, he joined the law firm of Williams & Connolly where he practiced primarily in the area of white-collar defense. Stier comes most recently from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, having served as the Deputy General Counsel for Litigation. A graduate of Yale University and Stanford Law School, Stier is a member of the National Academy of Public Administration, the Administrative Conference of the United States, and the National Advisory Board for Public Service at Harvard College.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF During the past 20 years, the nonpartisan, nonprofit Partnership for Public Service (ourpublicservice.org) has been dedicated to making the federal government more effective. It works across administrations to help transform the way government operates by increasing collaboration, accountability, efficiency and innovation.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of the Partnership for Public Service (PPS) and how you define its mission and purpose?

I believe that our government is our most important tool for dealing with our biggest problems. I would argue that it is not only the most important organization in our country, but the most important organization in our history in terms of being a force for good and a force for our values. It is an institution that does not stay healthy on its own and the reason why the Partnership for Public Service exists is that we recognize that a healthy government is fundamental to our democracy and to keeping us safe. We need to make sure that it gets the support it

needs. I believe that there is no higher calling than working in public service – the word service is fundamental whether you are talking about a civil servant or member of the military service.

The genesis of the Partnership is the belief that our government will not stay healthy on its own and that it needs support from the outside. In a country where there are 1.5 million nonprofits, all of which are doing important work in pursuing the public's good, we are pretty much alone in focusing on the overall institutional health of our federal government. This is a problem since we need stakeholders from outside of government – from business, philanthropy, universities, the media – who need to ensure that the institution is capable of executing effectively around key policies. We believe that there is no such thing as good policy if you cannot get the policy executed effectively. Right now we have so many different and fast moving challenges that having an effective government is getting harder and harder. The government is frankly not keeping up with the world around it and it needs our help.

How do you define the keys to an effective government and are you optimistic that we can achieve them?

“Max Stier has a passion for serving our country and all of its citizens that is second to none. His inspired leadership for advancing the mission of the Partnership for Public Service, ‘Building a better government and a stronger democracy,’ for the past 20 years has been exceptional.”

Douglas Conant,
Partnership for Public
Service Board Member,
Founder of ConantLeadership,
Retired CEO of Campbell Soup Company

“I believe that our government is our most important tool for dealing with our biggest problems. I would argue that it is not only the most important organization in our country, but the most important organization in our history in terms of being a force for good and a force for our values.”

**“The genesis of the Partnership
is the belief that our government will not stay healthy on its
own and that it needs support from the outside.”**

There are always two questions you need to answer – why does it matter and what can you do about it? We just discussed why it matters. When it comes to what we can do about it, it is not an option to do nothing, because the only alternative is to move to another country. It is reasonable to ask if the government can be effective and if this is solvable, but this should only fuel our efforts and investment in this work. I do believe that there is a lot to be optimistic about. We have a program where we recognize and honor the very best in our government, which is called the Service to America Medals. This is a way to celebrate the good in government which is often overlooked. We just celebrated Dr. Barney Graham and Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett at the National Institutes of Health’s Vaccine Research Center who were instrumental in creating the vaccines to fight COVID-19 that have been so critical in addressing the pandemic. I am optimistic because of people like them who are committed to working to solve the big challenges.

What was the vision for creating the Public Service Leadership Model?

This starts with the understanding that for all organizations, leadership matters. We asked ourselves if there was something special in leading in government and we put together a

world-class group of people from the military, academia, etc. who all agreed that there was in fact something special about leading in government. It comes back to the notion that leaders in the federal government are stewards of the public good which has implications for their behavior in many different respects. Our view is that there is a unique and powerful model for leading effectively in the public sector and it begins with the notion of public stewardship.

When you are addressing an issue that requires a long-term focus and commitment, how do you measure success for the Partnership’s efforts?

It is challenging since the goals relate to the public good rather than financial return, so it is much harder to measure. An example would be our work around employee engagement. The Partnership helps federal agencies improve employee engagement through our annual Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings. These rankings help agency leaders assess employee engagement, alerting them to signs of trouble and providing a roadmap to improve job satisfaction and the overall workplace experience. We also use Best Places data to provide agencies with guidance and training on employee engagement strategies.

Focusing on the presidential transition process is a big activity for us. We believe that preparing to lead the nation, whether it’s a presidential hopeful or an incumbent seeking a second term, requires extensive planning on personnel, policy and governance far in advance of Election Day. Managed well, this planning can lead to success. Handled poorly, a president can be susceptible to strategic errors and face difficulty responding to serious national security and domestic challenges. We created a new expectation where candidates begin preparing for a transition well before the election which in my mind is an example of an interim success.

Is it important for you to build a greater awareness and understanding of the Partnership for Public Service’s work?

We need both awareness inside government where I think our brand is actually quite strong, but outside of government as well. One reason is that it is essential for all stakeholders to see this as an issue of importance and another reason is that we will not get the support to be able to effectively do our work if we are unknown except inside government. We are trying to raise our profile which will help us get the work done. ●

**“Focusing on the presidential transition
process is a big activity for us. We believe that
preparing to lead the nation, whether it’s a
presidential hopeful or an incumbent seeking
a second term, requires extensive planning on
personnel, policy and governance far in advance
of Election Day.”**