

Kevin Minor: 0:05

Welcome. Episode 12, the NASPO Pulse. This is the podcast where we're monitoring issues in state procurement. We've got our finger on the pulse, people. I'm your host, Kevin Minor. We have a great episode for you today. I'm talking with Dr. Matthew Howe, associate Professor of Government and Public Administration at Eastern Kentucky University, which just so happens to be my alma mater and yes, I may have had to Google alma mater and make sure that it fits this monologue, and yes, it does.

Kevin Minor: 0:37

Dr. Howe presented a webinar for NASPO Tuesday, August 11th, over four strategies of affecting change in government agencies. It's a presentation of practical approaches. It includes implementing mandatory changes to policy and procedures, managing relationships with different agencies and advocating for your office. Dr. Howell and I mostly discuss the importance of managing your professional relationships post-pandemic. But if you're interested in the entire presentation and I know that you are, I'll make sure to put a link for the recording in this episode description. Let's take that pulse, Dr. Hal. Thank you so much for joining me today. How are you, sir? I'm good. I'm glad to be here. We're glad to have you. Dr. Howell is going to be presenting on the four stages of affecting change in government agencies. That's a webinar that NASPO is hosting Tuesday, August 11th at 3 pm. We are excited. Are you looking forward to that tomorrow? I?

Matthew Howell: 1:40

am. I've been working on it for the last several weeks almost a month at this point and I'm looking forward to it. I think it's going to be a good webinar. I hope it's going to be very informative to your members.

Kevin Minor: 1:50

So you are an associate professor of government and public administration at Eastern Kentucky University. Correct, what's your role at ECU and what's your experience in government and public administration?

Matthew Howell: 2:03

So at ECU, my primary appointment is teaching. That's half my job. I teach in the online MPA program. As I said earlier, our online MPA program is now the whole MPA program. We serve a diverse body of students, both in-service and pre-service, so people who are already working in public administration, people who are new at it. And that's my big job is I teach people how to do public administration. My particular focus is on program analysis and evaluation. Program evaluation I teach people how to set up experiments and make sure policies are working the way they're supposed to work. In addition to that, I also teach on bureaucracy and then a little bit about state politics and local politics.

Matthew Howell: 2:46

My personal experience in this is mostly from when I was a master's student and college student. I spent a lot of time working in local governments. I worked at my hometown in Missouri, Blue Springs. I worked there when I was in high school and early college. When I was a graduate student, I worked for the city of Paducah for a summer in the city management office and kind of got to rotate through all of the other offices. It was very cool to get hands-on experience on all the parts of local government, and now I research state and local government. So every year I spend a lot of time hanging out in mayor's offices and hanging out in Frankfort, in the capital, just watching what people do and talking to them about how they do their jobs.

Kevin Minor: 3:25

Like I said, Dr. Howell will be presenting on four strategies for effecting change in government agencies and a big part of. Where did a big part of this presentation come from?

Matthew Howell: 3:36

So most of this presentation is based on the work of a political scientist named James Q. Wilson who wrote back in

the 70s and 80s, kind of in the glory days of organizational research. This is back when Congress had enough money that they did things like randomized controlled testing on policies to see if it worked, and he was big into that. He did a lot of those experiments back in the day and because of that he wrote a book called Bureaucracy and because of that he wrote a book called bureaucracy which is still a seminal text that's still taught in classes today, and so a lot of it's drawn from there. There's a little bit of additional work which is just drawn from general public administration principles that we would talk about in the program evaluation class, for example, especially regarding how to think about the relationship between an agency and its clients and also its political oversight.

Kevin Minor: 4:29

Right, and throughout the presentation you're also you're talking about like practical approaches for implementing these changes, right, right, and how to advocate for your office, right? So, specifically today we wanted to focus on identifying and navigating those relationships with other entities, and those entities include executive agencies, political officials and elected bodies. So what does it mean to build those external relationships? What does that look like? What did that look like pre-COVID and what does that look like now?

Matthew Howell: 5:03

Sure, so a lot of this I see when I talk with local government officials, mayors in particular, but also managers. Policy has a very strong political component to it. Right, if you want to get something done, you need to have support from other people to do it. One of the concepts we're going to talk about at the webinar is this idea of a policy network or a policy environment, that's, all the people who can affect policy, all the resources they have that can affect the policy. It's really unusual for someone to have the entire policy in their own hands, that they can control it themselves.

Matthew Howell: 5:36

Usually, your money is coming from somewhere else, your political authority is coming from somewhere else. Your clients are someone else right. Authority is coming from somewhere else, your clients are someone else right, and so in order to make a policy, you have to get those other people to work with you. A lot of times, the theory is just oh well, they're do it because they're legally obligated to, and that doesn't usually work. Sometimes it does, sometimes a legal obligation works, but most of the time people work with you because they share your goals or because they like you, and so a lot of a successful manager or executive's job is maintaining those relationships. A lot of this is just go talk to them, right? You have to go up to the legislature every year and talk to them, because if the legislature doesn't like you or doesn't think about you, you don't get money. If you're working in a local government, you know you have to be in contact with your mayor and your council because even if even if they give you a pretty free reign, they're still the ones who are giving you money. And you need to develop that relationship. Make them feel like they understand what you're doing and that it's valuable and that it's important to them, so that when we come down to the question of, well, we have \$100,000 left in the budget and we got \$500,000 worth of things to fund, what do we fund? And they're going to fund the stuff that they think is important and they're going to fund the stuff that they like, which means that you have to have that relationship. So that's kind of the going up relationship. Then there's the going down relationship, which is with your clients, right, so you serve someone.

Matthew Howell: 7:09

I'm looking at the. I've been looking over that handbook you guys sent me, which is great stuff. I really loved that, you know, and it talks about being a partner for other agencies in the state government and providing services to those state agencies. That is a very important thing to do because if those clients, if those people who you serve, don't see value in what you offer, they're not going to stand up for you, they're not going to talk you up, they're not going to go to their bosses and say, oh yeah, the procurement guys, they've been great, they've, they've saved us so much money, they have helped us get these contracts, get these contracts done. Um, you know, again, it's a very, it's a very personal thing, it's a very personal touch. You have to have that relationship and a lot of the time that means FaceTime. You just got to get with them and you got to, you got to work with them in person. I guess today it would be zoom time, right, because of coronavirus.

Matthew Howell: 7:56

And then the other part of it is just doing your job and doing it very well, even if you're not the you know. So being personable and having that FaceTime is valuable and important. That's, that's a lot of my research. Local government officials they work with people they see and they know that they work with, and I think that probably generalizes to agencies and state legislators. They they work with the people they see and they work with, you know, on a on a regular basis. They don't just randomly decide oh, I'm going to go, I'm going to go do something, but if you don't provide value, if you don't do good work, you can be the most personable person in the world, no one is going to be super excited to come work with you. So that's the second part of it. And then what do we do? So that's the first two parts. Part one is be personable, have that relationship. Part two is do your job well so that people be competent, so that people value what you provide to them, that you provide a value to them. And then the third thing is when you get into a actual fight which you don't want to get into, fights very often like don't go around picking fights, but we are in the age of coronavirus, we're in the age of tax revenues declining. You've got to be an advocate for your office. If you've done the first two things, then you're going to be in a pretty good position, because they already like you and they already know you provide value. So half the advocacy job is already done. The second half of the advocacy job is then trying to figure out things that you can do that will make your office more valuable to people, that they will continue supporting you, and also, if there are things you can do, that will make your office easier to run.

Matthew Howell: 9:33

One of the things we're going to talk about in more detail tomorrow is this idea of autonomy. So one of the strategies is called budget cutting. There's four strategies. One of them is called budget cutting, and the budget cutting strategy is where you feel like you don't have a lot of outside support, maybe because you're in a time of contraction, maybe you're in a time of declining revenue support, maybe because you're in a time of contraction, maybe you're in a time of declining revenue.

Matthew Howell: 9:52

So the budget cutter goes to the legislature and says, look, I'm going to cut the budget a little bit, I'm going to save you money, but in return for that I need to be able to make efficiencies, which means I need more authority to do things. Budget cutting can actually be a very effective way of actually building power in an agency, because you trade money for autonomy and this allows the procurement officers to more directly look over the contracts to more directly maybe centralize this is going to depend on your agency, but we can centralize some, some more procurement things. That gives the agency more power, which means that we can do it more effectively, which means we can do it more cheaply, and that's the kind of advocacy strategy that you can use to to maintain power and maintain the the ability of your office to work during coronavirus, your office to work during coronavirus.

Kevin Minor: 10:48

So not only more cheaply but more efficient as well. Are cultivating those relationships in that process that you just talked about and those points? Are those the same in a centralized office versus a decentralized office, or are there variations?

Matthew Howell: 11:07

Yeah, there'll be variations. Um, what your network looks like depends a lot on the institutional arrangement of your, of your state or local government. So I've been, uh I've been, in places that have mostly been decentralized, that have, uh, you know, they've had a, they've had a finance person who oversaw things like contracts. But contracts were generally handled by, uh, the offices themselves. Right, they would just check in with the finance office and make sure things were kosher. I have read and studied places that were more centralized In more decentralized areas.

Matthew Howell: 11:41

The difficulty you have is that, or there's difficulties and benefits. The difficulty is everybody is spread out, which means it's harder to get FaceTime with all the people you need. The difficulty is everybody is spread out, which means it's harder to get FaceTime with all the people you need. The benefit is that everybody's specialized. So, whatever your particular issue is, there is someone you can talk to who is the master of that issue.

Matthew Howell: 12:02

When I worked in Paducah, engineering handled a lot of contracts and those were run through the engineering department with oversight from finance. But it meant that the people in engineering, regardless of where the contract was actually housed it actually might have legally been housed in finance, but the people in engineering understood the contracts buying and they could very easily explain this to the mayor and the city council to get approval for things when they wanted to buy something. In other places, a more centralized office. The upside of that is everything's in one place so it's easy to get that face time and those relationships. The downside is a lot of times you'll ask the centralized person what is this thing you need? And they'll have to say I don't actually know. I'm going to have to go check with the client and I'll get back to you.

Kevin Minor: 12:55

What unique challenges do government agencies face when they're trying to make these relationships with other agencies?

Matthew Howell: 13:02

So one of the one of the unique challenges that government has is especially in the United States is separation of power and I power, and I want to actually use this in a broader sense than usual. I'm not just talking about legislature versus executive, legislature versus agencies. I mean that actual power and resources are in different hands. The legislature has money. A different part of the legislature might be the one that gives you statutory authority. Different committees might be involved in this, and in the private sector, usually all this is in the same place. The board of directors has the legal authority and they have the money and they dole that out. They delegate that as they want. But at the government level, in cities and states, at the federal level, all those resources are spread out. Different people have different resources, and this is partly intentional. Is it means that if different people have different resources, it means you can't do anything unless they all agree? So if you grab that resource and you hold on to it, one of the things we're going to talk about is how to use the resources that you have as a procurement officer. So procurement officers have potentially a bunch of different resources that they can use, so they might have legal authority that allows them to act without having to check with the elected branches. They might have resources if they can self-fund. They might have certain powers that they can do, like oversight or investigatory powers over contracts. Those are all things that they can use to leverage the people they have to work with right.

Matthew Howell: 14:48

So if you need a client agency and one of the agencies you serve, if you need them to do something for you and they're dragging their feet and that's causing you headaches with the legislature, well you have some tools you can use. Like you know. If you got, you know we need you guys to do this. I don't know whatever this is. We need you guys to file a certain form or give us a report, and we can't go to the legislature until you do that. And if you don't do that, we're going to be very curious as to why, and we're going to send our inspector general over there to look. Right, you know, which is maybe something you should do anyway, but it can also be part of the of the political give and take. We see this, obviously with legislatures. When they're mad at the, when they're mad at the executive, they'll call an agency head over and chew them out in a committee hearing Right Right Um. Procurement officers probably can't do that because they're not legislatures.

Kevin Minor: 15:41

I would say yeah. I would say not, not quite to that extent. Right, they can't do that, but they, they have other things that they can do, right?

Matthew Howell: 15:48

Um, you know you need our signature before you can do something, right? So you're not going to get our signature until you give us that report, right, you know, and the key thing for a manager or an executive to do is to kind of focus on what their tools are, what their tasks are, what they have that they can work with, what they do, what they do super well, and then use that to work with other agencies. You know, this doesn't I'm making the sound adversarial, but it doesn't have to be adversarial. Okay, you know, you can work a very nice relationship with other people where you just have a system down where they send you reports and you give them signatures and at the end of the day, we have a smooth operating.

Kevin Minor: 16:31

Very symbiotic relationship Right.

Matthew Howell: 16:35

We have good procedures. We tell you what we need and you provide us that information. You provide us that information, we provide you the signatures to approve it and you can go do it. On the flip side, you also have to recognize that there are people who have levers over you and you have to learn how to deal with those. So the legislature has a big lever most of the time, which is funding. You got to do what keeps the legislature happy, because the legislature has that hammer.

Matthew Howell: 16:59

Now this doesn't mean you have to just do what the legislature says, because the legislature if it's a good legislature, which most of them are we'll listen to you. You go up there. You go up to the legislature and you say, hey, the procurement office needs this, this and this, and if we do that, we can give better services to our client agencies and that will, in turn, give better service to you. The legislature should be able to take that into consideration. Now there doesn't mean you're going to win. The legislature may ultimately say, hey, look, we don't have the money for this, or we have bigger fish to fry, we have bigger problems. We can't deal with this right now. What can you do with what we can offer you. But there is room for a manager and an executive to talk to the legislature and get them to give a little bit right.

Matthew Howell: 17:45

This isn't actually our standard model is the legislature says, do this and everyone goes and does it. That's not really the way it works. Give a little bit right. This isn't actually our standard model is the legislature says, do this and everyone goes and does it. That's not really the way it works. You can negotiate this. You can go up and you can. You can politic a little bit. You know again. Now I want to be clear here. I'm saying you can politic in the sense that you can talk to them about policy and you can talk to them about what services you?

Matthew Howell: 18:07

provide. I'm not talking about going up and saying, oh, we're going to, you know, we're going to screw the other party kind of politics, right, right. Just in politics in the sense of like office politics, right yeah. Wilson has a great line in his book. He says bad executives think their job is management. Good executives recognize that their job is dealing with all the piddly stuff that lets their managers do their job.

Kevin Minor: 18:29

What about dealing with statutory mandates? What about dealing with things that you can't get around?

Matthew Howell: 18:34

Once the legislature makes its decision. You got to live with that. The negotiation all happens before the decision is made. After the decision, it's too late to negotiate At that point. You just got to deal with what comes down. They might give you some flexibility. A lot of legislatures like to do that. They give flexibility to the agencies and say here's kind of what we want you to achieve and here's the toolbox you have. So you want to focus on what you're best at.

Another good piece of advice I've heard over the years is the job is too big for anyone to do. You have to focus on what's most important. If you try to do everything, you're going to do nothing.

Kevin Minor: 19:11

So I want to switch gears just a little bit. We're running out of time, but I really want to talk about the pandemic just a little bit more. So, due to the pandemic, many procurement offices are going to face budget cuts. It's just going to happen. What kind of relationships do agencies like procurement offices need to make to ensure that they are in a good place to advocate for their budget, for their office?

Matthew Howell: 19:35

Yeah, so there's two pieces of kind of standard advice, for this varies from state to state, but look at who has control over your budget. So is the legislature going to be making these decisions or is the governor going to be making these decisions? And that's kind of your direct relationship. So if the governor is making decisions, you need to talk to the governor. You need to be talking to the governor now so that the governor knows what you need and what you can provide. So when the governor is making decisions over what gets funded and what doesn't get funded, kind of on an emergency basis until the legislature comes back, you're in the queue, right? Same thing if it's the legislature, if it's a full-time state with a full-time legislature and the legislature makes these decisions, you need to be in the legislature talking to the legislature about what do you do, what value you provide and how you get the money. That's your direct relationship and that is important.

Matthew Howell: 20:23

But I think the undervalued one is your clients, right, because if you are a centralized state procurement office, you serve every other agency in some, in some form or fashion, and if you serve every other agency, that lets you get them to advocate for you, right, you know, hey, you know, state police, we have helped you guys with your spare parts program. We want to keep helping you with your spare parts program. But in order to keep helping with your spare parts program, we need resources too. We need money. And so now, suddenly, it's not the state procurement office going up there and saying, hey, we need all this money. It's everybody going up there with the state procurement office saying, hey, we need money and we need you to make sure that they're funded too, because they support us well.

Matthew Howell: 21:15

And again, this is easiest to do if you already have a good relationship with them. It's easiest to do if you already provide a lot of value. And again, that's the thing to focus on what do you do? What is your value to your clients? What is your value to your oversight? As you can demonstrate that value, you will get rewarded. Now, again, right now, that reward might just be a smaller cut, because everyone's budgets are being shot up right now, but if you can demonstrate value, you will get something for it Dr, Howe do you have any advice for our membership, for our listeners?

Matthew Howell: 21:51

Yeah, advice is always hard for an academic to give, on the one hand, on the other hand, yeah, most important thing for anybody who works in government to do is remember that you're here to do a job, that that job is political. This does not mean that your life is defined by politics. It means that there is a human and political aspect of your job that you have to do. You have to keep people happy, you have to provide good services, you have to be a good person to work with and to work for, and if you can focus on those things, I think you'll have a much easier time going through the rough times.

Matthew Howell: 22:29

Oh, oh, I forget how the expression goes, but uh, you know, a rich man is a man who has friends, right? Or you know, a happy man's richness is his friends, right? You know this is a political business. We make decisions that affect people. We make decisions that require cooperation by diverse groups. The way that you do that is you

make friends and you have good relationships with people and you focus on, focus on that as a. You know that is your job if you're at the top is build those relationships, build those friends, keep the interest groups happy, keep the governor happy, keep the legislature happy. It's a hard job. That's why they, that's why you, get to do it. Uh, you know it's. It is a public service, is an honor, but it's also a hard task. And so I would just say remember that you're not in it for the money. Uh, just remember that and uh, you know you'll, you'll get through it. You'll get through this right. This too shall pass.

Kevin Minor: 23:25

So Dr Howe is associate professor of government and public administration at Eastern Kentucky University. Dr Howell, thank you so much for joining me today. Thank you for having me. So we know it takes a lot of time to build these vital, albeit dynamic, relationships, and it's important to understand how they can benefit you as well as the other parties involved. It's key in showing the value of your agency parties involved. It's key in showing the value of your agency, and it's just as critical to maintain those relationships, which can be extra difficult right now.

Kevin Minor: 23:58

You have to select and apply specific strategies, like the ones Dr Howell was talking about. Like he said, the job is too big for anyone to do, so focus on what's most important. If you try to do everything, you're going to end up doing nothing. Most of all, just be a good person to work with and work for. What do you think? We'd love to know your thoughts. Email us your questions. Comments at podcast at naspoorg. That does it for us today on the Pulse. If you haven't already, make sure you subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, spotify, google or wherever you get them listenings. You do not want to be the only one in the room that didn't take the Pulse. Make sure you check out our blog PulseNASPOorg and catch up on some procurement articles written by your very own NASPO staff. I'm Kevin Miner. Until next time.