



NAME

Couchella Session: Road to the SES – Insights from Federal Leaders

DATE

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DURATION

1h 6m 48s

6 SPEAKERS

Maria DeFazio

Jason Briefel

Tracy Carson

Allyson Pokres

Virginia Huth

Calvin Byrd

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Maria DeFazio

Ok, so we are we are live, we are broadcasting, and we should be getting folks in from the waiting room. So welcome, welcome, everyone who is joining us in the audience today, where we're going to have a few minutes just to get everybody on board before we start. So tuck in, get ready for a great conversation and we will be back with you in just a second. All right, excellent. Thank you all so very, very much for joining us. As you can see in the chat, we've asked you to just sort of let us know who you are, where you're joining us from, just to sort of break the ice and get us started. So go ahead and start dropping that in the chat function you can see right there. My name is Maria DeFazio. I am the executive director of the Presidential Management Alumni Association. I'll also be acting as the producer for today's virtual event. So tech questions, tech problems, you can absolutely chat me in the chat box. I wanted to give a little quick overview. The Presidential Management Alumni Association is a relatively new organization. We are a 501(c)3. We are the official alumni association of the PMI and PMF Programs. We've been around for a little over two years at this point. And if you're attending this, you are probably familiar with our Couchella sessions. We started them last year as sort of a response to COVID and feeling the need to get together and learn and try to stay connected despite all the distance.

[00:03:09] Maria DeFazio

And it's turned into a really popular offering of ours. So we have decided to formally continue Couchella once a month sessions from from now on. And we will be continuing to put together events like these so that we can get together and learn and chat as a community. So we are very excited that for 2021 we already have a couple new sessions in the hopper. You'll find out more about those in the future. But February is going to be a session on tips for returning to federal service after being away. And then March is going to be our March Mentor Madness Month. We've got a couple of events that go along with that, not just our Couchella. So we'll be focusing on mentoring in March. Now, as we're all getting set, I just want to go over some quick housekeeping things. As a disclaimer, all of our participants today are speaking not in their official roles as current or former executives within the government. They are speaking as colleagues. They are speaking to give friendly advice and to help our community. So please don't take this as gospel from a particular agency. We are going to be recording this session. The session will be posted to our trading page. We will be adding a transcript of the session as well so that it will be fully accessible.

[00:04:33] Maria DeFazio

If you have questions, which we want you to have questions, please have questions, ask questions. That's why we're here today. You can put those in the question and answer function, particularly if you're if you're on the full Zoom app, use the Q&A function. I can also take some in the chat. If they end up there, that's fine. If you're having a technical problem or technical question, put that in the chat box, because as the producer, I'll be keeping an eye on that to make sure we have everything we need. Today's session is the result of our partnership with the Senior Executives Association. We are super excited to be able to bring you more events with the SEA. We're so excited to have all of these folks here today. It makes a lot of sense that PMAA would be doing a lot of work with SEA because, quite frankly, more than one in ten SES-ers or other senior leaders in the government are PMI or PMF alumna or alumni. And so it makes for a really great both formal and informal relationship with. So we are so extraordinarily thankful to have them and some of their board members here today to help answer our questions about what it's like to have a career in the senior executive service just so that everybody can take a look. If you aren't familiar with the SEA, obviously they're the association for the SES-ers across the country.

[00:05:59] Maria DeFazio

They've also expanded membership. So you can join the SEA even if you're only a GS-12 or you're not entirely sure where you're where you're headed. In terms of SES, SEA has all sorts of resources for you. So they support the SES and the leadership pipeline and federal service by providing tools, trainings and connections to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing society. Insight into cutting edge practices and resources, career advancement, tools and through thought leadership SEA helps members build professional leadership at a leadership profession into federal service. In addition, they have been a fantastic partner helping PMA really get off the ground. So I will stop talking and bounce ahead. Just I will give you a quick introduction of today's moderator. Jason Briefel is the executive director slash director of policy and outreach for the Senior Executives Association. He's also the director of government and public affairs at the law firm Shaw, Bransford and Roth. And if I remember correctly, Jason, you're also married to a PMF. That is true. That is so very connected to the program. So I am going to have Jason take over and and start our session today without any further ado. So thank you, Jason, for being here. And thank you for helping us put together a great panel. And we're really excited to have you. Awesome.

[00:07:33] Jason Briefel

Thanks so much, Maria, and thank you all for joining us today; really appreciate PMAA putting this event together and the opportunity to work together and have this conversation with you all, as as Maria mentioned, SEA has, as in recent years, shifted its focus not only to defending kind of the SES and the senior leadership corps, but also developing programing and activities, opportunities for interaction to build that senior leadership corps. And that's why we opened the doors for participation in the association for GS-12s and above, and then full membership status available for folks at the GS-15 or SES or other equivalent levels. I want to get to our conversation today. That's the why you all have joined us. And I'm just going to tell you who our panelists are, and then I'm going to ask each of them to take a couple of minutes to introduce themselves and to lay out their career journeys. Please do. If you have questions, drop them in the Q&A. We are going to be tracking that throughout the session. Our goal here is to have about twenty five thirty minute conversation with our panel and then open the floor to the questions that we get from you, our audience. So please don't be shy. Drop them in the chat. We'll be tracking those, Maria and I, and we'll feed them up to our panel and really thrilled to see all the interest in the session. And I'm sure we'll be back again real soon. Let me briefly introduce our panel members, one of your PMAA board members and SES at the State Department, Tracey Carson, also a PMF alumni, but a GS-15 who is in charge of her human resources department at the VA OIG. Allyson Pokres from our SEA board of directors. We have Virginia Huth. She is a senior executive at the General Services Administration. We also have Calvin Byrd. He was a senior level adviser at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission who recently left government service. So I want to open up to to having our panelists introduce themselves. And Tracy, can you please kick us off?

[00:09:53] Tracy Carson

Absolutely. Hi, everyone, I'm very excited for the opportunity to be here. My name is Tracy Carson. I'm currently the acting director of foreign assistance in the State Department's Office of Foreign Assistance. I'm a career member of the Senior Executive Service. My journey to the SES started through what I affectionately like to call my two loves, which is Africa and policy debate. I was a competitive debater in high school and college and anyone familiar with the sport knows that, one, it is a sport and two competitions typically call for policy change by the US.

[00:10:34] Tracy Carson

I minored in African studies and in graduate school, my doctoral thesis focused on resistance movements in South Africa. So in retrospect, I feel like my love for government and the type of work that I do in the State Department really just married these two passions. I joined the federal government in 2009 as a Presidential Management Fellow, so I really appreciate the seat that you all are occupying. I went to graduate school overseas, so I actually did learn about the program through traditional means. I learned about it through some of my undergraduate friends who were still in touch with me and had learned through their different channels. I was for once I joined. I worked at several agencies before moving to the US Agency for International Development and ultimately now the State Department. I started as an analyst working on coordinating US foreign aid to Africa. And over the last 10 years is when I transitioned into senior leadership as a civil servant. I've been in the SES for two years and at the time I did not know if I really wanted to join the SES. I was probably sitting in the same seat saying, Should I do it? What does it mean? What types of factors should I consider when doing it? Ultimately, I joined because there was a particular promotional opportunity in my office that I applied for that set the stage for me to in order to encumber that position to be in the SES. So I did not go through an executive development program. I drafted my my package and my core qualifications. It sort of went through the process almost independently.

[00:12:16] Tracy Carson

A couple of things. And then I'll turn it over to folks that I would at least say from my experience that you may want to think about its don't just...that I had to use. Don't just think about this as a position. Think about responsibility that's coming with joining the senior executive service. That is a responsibility to lead people to lead change, to build coalitions, to demonstrate a business acumen, to be results driven. And so when you think less about do I move up and more about what am I actually being asked to do, that comes with a tremendous degree of responsibility, especially when it's the responsibility to lead other people. I'd also say that once you sort of think about those things and what you're really being asked to do, then make sure you have faith in yourself. So this is especially true if you're from a demographic that's historically underrepresented. I didn't go through a program, but at some point in time, I had to have a conversation with myself about how and my ability and my belief in myself to be able to rise to the occasion and put into that, and put into the position. So don't forget the responsibility you're taking on. Don't just do it with an intent to move up. Really think about it. Eyes wide open. What does this mean for you and what does this actually mean for what you're being asked to do? Very happy to have the conversation will answer any questions that you all have and very excited to to work with the other panelists as well. Thanks.

[00:13:31] Jason Briefel

Awesome, Tracy, thanks so much for that wonderful introduction. Glad to have you here with us today. Alison, let's go over to you now.

[00:13:41] Allyson Pokres

Thank you, Jason.

[00:13:43] Allyson Pokres

So, as Jason mentioned, I'm the one non-SES or SL on this panel, I am a PMF alumni, though I actually joined the PMF program in 2008 after graduating law school and was after having done two summers as a law clerk in the federal government, wanted to sort of see what else was out there prior to committing myself to being a lawyer.

[00:14:10] Allyson Pokres

And so I entered the PMF program and I actually really wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

[00:14:18] Allyson Pokres

A former supervisor of mine from when I worked at OGC at VA had at some point said that when we were talking, you know, so that she was actually interested in joining the program. But being a lawyer was having trouble with the business acumen portion of it. And so she said maybe you should look into budget. And so I did. I was a budget analyst at Department of Homeland Security for my term during PMF from 2008 to 2010, and I honestly saw it as checking the box. I didn't really plan to do it as long as I did, but it turned out to be a really good fit for me. For the time, I really enjoyed it and kept moving up.

[00:15:02] Allyson Pokres

I stayed there after I finished the PMF program and became the budget section chief. I left there and about 2014, and I came to VA Office of Inspector General, which is where I currently am. I went there sort of starting doing budget and that expanded to internal controls and records management. It was kind of a weird hodgepodge of positions, of functions, if you will.

[00:15:37] Allyson Pokres

And then we had a bit of a reorganization.

[00:15:40] Allyson Pokres

And in yeah, April 2018 did a pretty big reorganization and they decided to bring some H.R. functions that we had been contracting out in-house. And we had a new AIG, Assistant Inspector General for Management Administration, who asked me if I would be willing to lead that transition. And, you know, I said I have no background in that, but I'm happy to if you want. And, she said, sure. And so here we are. It's been a blast, I never would have seen myself doing H.R. certainly not when I was a PMF over 10 years ago and probably not even four years ago, to be honest. But I'm I'm really enjoying it. I oversee staffing and recruitment, employee relations and training and development. And so I'm I'm very excited to be here. I'm actually excited to listen to all of the other panelists because I think I'm in the same boat as a lot of people participating in this training with the I don't know if I want to be an SES. I can honestly say that I have not really started thinking about ECQs or anything of that sort. So I'm or maybe I should have started thinking about it, but have not, put pen to paper at all. So I'm really excited to be here and to learn from the other panelists myself.

[00:17:09] Jason Briefel

Thanks so much, Alison, and really appreciate having you on on the panel and sharing your journey with us. And we're going to have you ask some questions of our crew before we open it up to the panel and a little bit. Virginia, you're up next.

[00:17:30] Jason Briefel

Oops your muted.

[00:17:33] Virginia Huth

I unmuted thanks, Jason, for the introduction, so excited to be here, I, I started my career in government back in 1993. I was not a PMF. I had graduated from the Kennedy School of Government, now it's the Harvard Kennedy School, but was so dismayed that I wasn't a PMF. And but at the same time, my first position was at the Office of Management and Budget, and they don't allow PMFs because they don't want anyone to rotate. So, so while I was so disappointed not to do it, I have to say I did start off at a great place in government getting a bird's eye view of what happens across the federal space. And I did that for probably six years. Then I went to the private sector. I felt I wanted to broaden myself and get that external experience. I was with IBM for about five years as a senior managing consultant, and then I decided to come back into government because my true passion was really federal service. And I it took me a while. That's the topic, I think, of another session that the PMAA has scheduled. But it was harder to get back in than I thought. But since then, I've worked in several different agencies. I'm in my fourth senior executive service position and currently at the General Services Administration. And I think one of the things I found interesting is that as I pursued my career for me, I've taken the path that is how do I broaden my experience, you know, I focused for me. I focused on my strengths, which are leadership skills and change management skills. But I've worked in I.T., I've worked in acquisition, I've worked in budgeting, and I've worked in you know, I've got experience throughout a range of administrative areas, whether it's records management or all of that. So for me, I've taken a broader approach where some people might want to specialize. So that's just sort of a teaser for the conversation going forward.

[00:19:41] Jason Briefel

Awesome, thanks so much, Virginia. And last but not least, of course, of course, we had to have a ladies first. Calvin, tell us about your journey.

[00:19:50] Calvin Byrd

Thank you, Jason. My name is Calvin Byrd, and I formerly served at the senior level adviser for physical security at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

[00:20:01] Calvin Byrd

I retired in 2016 at the thirty-eight years that included service at both NRC and the Federal Emergency Management Agency specializing in security and emergency preparedness. I served as chief of NRC's Physical Security Branch during the 9/11 terrorist attacks and directed increased protection at all NRC facilities. Earlier in my career, I served as chief of FEMA's technical and physical security division. I also served as a special assistant to FEMA Director James Lee Witt and assisted in the agency's response to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. I was also privileged to serve on a six-month detail to the President Clinton's national partnership Reinventing Government Task Force. And that's just a snapshot of my background. Now, I'd like to share with you my story about my journey to the SES. In 1991, while serving as chief of FEMA's technical and physical security division, as the GS-14 I completed an IDP, individual development plan, and it proved to be my roadmap to the senior level. At that time, I worked for FEMA's director of security, who was an SES and retired Marine who had extraordinary leadership skills, and upon reading my IDP looked at it and smiled and he said, you know, you really have a big dream. And he said, "I admire that." He volunteered to serve as a mentor to help me build a career portfolio of major accomplishments so that would qualify for the SES when one became available.

[00:21:50] Calvin Byrd

We quickly began to take actions to build my resume. With his sponsorship, I was selected to participate in the Council for Excellence in Governance Fellows program in the 1991-1992 class. And it was a year long program that focused on leadership development. And I learned a lot about leadership and also established a lot of high-level contacts during that time. And this led to my selection to serve on a six-month detail on the Reinventing Government Task Force. And when the detailed and I was elevated to work for the FEMA director and I was the liaison to the National Performance Review. In 1999, I left FEMA to accept a GS-15 position at NRC as chief of physical security and subsequently acting deputy director of security. In that capacity, I represented NRC on the Department of Homeland Security's Interagency Security Committee and distinguished myself by serving on a working group that developed new security standards for all federal facilities. So since 1996, I had applied for three to six positions and at various agencies and always qualified. In one case, I was interviewed but was not selected and in the other case the position was canceled. So in 2002, while at NRC, I spent two months rewriting my ECQs, executive core qualifications, to apply for the SES Candidate Development Program.

[00:23:35] Calvin Byrd

I applied for the SES CDP in 2002, was not selected. Applied again in 2005, was not selected and, applied again in 2008. My office director at that time served. He served on the executive resources board and indicated that I had an outstanding application. He said that he was hearing good things and he believed that I would be selected. Around the same time, a senior level adviser for physical security position was created by the NRC with OPM approval and the vacancy was advertised, I applied for the SL position and was selected. Now it was decision time. Do I take the SL or wait for a possible selection into the CDP? I looked at the facts. SES and SL employees receive comparable pay and bonuses. And can carry up to seven hundred twenty hours annual leave. However, the SL position does not require as much executive management responsibilities. This was the perfect fit for me, especially since I would start receiving the SL pay right away. I then withdrew my SES CDP application from consideration. In summary, I started my SES journey in 1991 and was selected for SL in 2008. That's 17 years later. The moral of the story it's not easy. I hope you can earn an SL or SES in less time, but if you really want it, never give up the fight. Thank you.

[00:25:27] Jason Briefel

Awesome, Calvin, thanks so much for sharing your journey with us. You had some really important points there that we're all going to have our own journey through leadership within public service, and it's going to look different for everyone. But that network that you build along the way, those mentors and colleagues that you can put around you to keep you moving and working toward those objectives is the key part of that success.

[00:25:55] Jason Briefel

And that's a thread that I wanted to pull with our panel in terms of how did you or how have you found mentors or coaches to help you through your your professional journey, through your leadership journey.

[00:26:11] Jason Briefel

How have you go about finding those individuals? How do you establish those relationships? And let's I don't know if someone wants to go first. Calvin, you just told your story. I don't know if anyone wants to pop in on this one.

[00:26:29] Jason Briefel

Tracy, go ahead.

[00:26:30] Tracy Carson

I'll just say and apologies, my lights keep going off in the back. I'll just say up front mentors have been invaluable to me, both formal through programs as well as informal programs. I think the higher up you move, the more responsibility you have, the more you realize you don't have all the answers. And so at every juncture where you're interacting with folks where you can have a trust-based relationship and you can learn from one another, you want to expand your network of people who you can bounce ideas off and think through difficult situations with. And so for me personally, once I joined the senior executive service to to Mr. Byrd's point, I really did have to come up with an IDP. All right. If I'm going to take this on, where do I want to be in five years and what are the things I need to be doing, the relationships I have to have, the developmental opportunities to get me there. And one core part of it for me was I need an executive coach. I need to actually think about and figure out what do I need to do to lead effectively. But also I need to make sure I have mentors who I can talk to in confidence to brainstorm and think about different ideas. It's really hard sometimes if you're not naturally extroverted at times to sort of go and proactively approach someone about being a mentor, but would say to the degree that you both find someone that you can connect with to to serve as a mentor, it's invaluable but also finding mentors who are different from you, who offer a different perspective, who you can talk about different things is really important, especially as you move up, because the types of challenges you're dealing with are going to be different. And those are the the folks you can leverage. So for me personally, it's been invaluable. Over.

[00:28:21] Jason Briefel

Thanks, Tracy. Virginia?

[00:28:25] Virginia Huth

So, yeah, Tracy, you hit it on the head, the number one thing is mentoring, I would say some agencies, you're lucky if you've got a formal mentoring program in place, take advantage of it. If there's not a formal one, you might need to figure it out. I know. I don't know. I should I should have checked. SEA has had a mentoring program. I don't know if it's active right now, but I'll circle back on that later. But wherever you find one again, it can be just as simple as reaching out to someone you know and trust or even acting, asking recommendations. I mentor people mentored for people over the last two years. Some of them I didn't know before they approached me. But they, they said someone had recommended me, so feel free to, you know, push, push a little bit on that. And then the other thing is feel free to reach out to your peers. Peer coaching can be very valuable as well. You know, if you've got some colleagues, other folks, one of the things I did years ago is I started gathering a group of of people sort of in my professional circle, and I said, let's just let's just meet every week or two and just talk talk about what we're doing, what we need to learn, you know, how to stay organized and just kind of advise each other. And that's that's another great thing you can do. And it'll help you learn about opportunities as well.

[00:29:54] Allyson Pokres

And I'll put in a quick plug for the SEA YGL mentoring program that Jason just mentioned in the comments I did that myself about just before coming to VA. So probably like seven years ago or so and still talk regularly with the mentor who is just, you know, randomly paired with me. And so I don't know the extent to which I lucked out by getting a great mentor.

[00:30:19] Allyson Pokres

But I think that there are some really great people who are who are members of the senior executive association who really are passionate about mentoring people. And it was a great experience for me and continues to be a great experience with me.

[00:30:35] Virginia Huth

I'm so happy. Yeah, there's a woman I mentored through the SCA YGL in 2019, and she and I text all the time. She texted me the other day. It's been it's been great.

[00:30:50] Jason Briefel

Wonderful. Calvin, anything else to add on this topic?

[00:30:55] Calvin Byrd

Yes. In terms of mentors, I mean, that's an invaluable asset to have someone who you can talk to in a confidential way and share some struggles you might be having and just get their expert advice. And but and when you get that advice, you should keep it confidential because the mentor is going to tell you not what you want to hear, but what you need to know. And sometimes the information is going to be information that is uncomfortable to you because everyone has flaws and a mentor who is a good mentor will identify your shortcomings, your weaknesses, and offer advice how you can improve the lessons learned. But just as important as a mentor, you should have various mentors. You have someone who has similar to teach you and people who are very different than you. And one thing I would like to add also is there's a difference between a mentor and a sponsor. You also want to have a sponsor, someone who's going to be in the role when big decisions are being made, say, on the Executive Resources Board and your SES CDP application before them. You want to have a sponsor who's going to hit his fist on the table and say, why not consider this candidate, be your champion to and say this guy should be in or this lady should be in the SES program because the person has paid their dues. So you need a sponsor. And so don't confuse the two. A mentor is nice, and a mentor will hear a lot of information with you, but a sponsor will be your champion and it has to be someone who is. So do your homework, find out who's on the ERB.

[00:32:51] Jason Briefel

Thanks, Calvin, and team, that some some really great advice on one question that came through the chat that I wanted to get the perspective of this group on, which is kind of the pros and cons of entering the SES, especially if you're a higher level, higher stepped GS-15, not much more pay a lot more headaches. Can you speak to kind of the the risk reward considerations that that you went through or that that others may think about as they're considering their career journey? Virginia?

[00:33:28] Virginia Huth

I don't want to jump in ahead of anyone else, but I think this is a very real question.

[00:33:35] Virginia Huth

The SES pay does not tend to increase as rapidly, rapidly being relative as, you know, the GS bands. And so you have really, in many instances, a senior fifteens at a step 10 who could earn more than an SES. Now, of course, you have a higher cap on SES. But but the bottom line is SES is a very, very demanding position. You're responsible for your entire program, not just yourself. You've got to be able to be a good manager because management is exactly what a senior executive does. You've got to be able to make sure the budget is in order and the books are aligned in that you've delivered on your programmatic requirements. And I will tell you that maybe others have had different experiences for me. I usually work 50 to 60 hours a week as an SES in order to, you know, to make sure the program is running smoothly. It's not always like that, but that's that's not infrequent. I'm doing that right now. So it's it's something you really have to have an appetite for. You need to want to be a leader. I will add, I've always known I wanted to be a leader. My my brother, who's now a senior engineer at Google jokes. I was his big sister. He's like, you were my first boss, you know, the bossy big sister. Right. You know, but but, you know, it's it's just kind of the way I'm wired. I like to take charge and reorganize and, you know, be the field marshal. So, you know, look at yourself. What is it you really want to do? Is that part of your of your approach? It's not about the pay increase. It's an enormous amount of responsibility. You know, again, it's interacting with senior officials, usually political officials, and that is its own sets of challenges. Regardless of the political party. You've really got to have a taste and an openness for a myriad of challenges. And it's not something to be considered lightly.

[00:35:46] Calvin Byrd

Oh, yeah, I was a GS-14 and I applied for SES position at the GS-14 it was the salary, the bonuses and the opportunity to lead and make changes. You know, I like solving big problems. But when I became a GS-15 and I began to go up the step ladder, the the pay differential wasn't as great. But what was attractive was bonuses. Yeah, I was hearing about the very attractive bonuses that the SESers were receiving and that was of interest to me. And also, you know, I'm a change agent type leader that if there's a big problem, I want to solve the problem. I want to get involved and I want to be a shot caller. So it really fit with my personality and also the ability to carry seven hundred and twenty hours of annual leave, when you start talking about that "high three" in retirement. And you get a you know, I was hearing about people retiring with seven hundred and twenty hours of annual leave and they're getting the lump sum check and that was very attractive to me. So all of those things considered taking into consideration as I looked at the SES.

[00:37:08] Tracy Carson

Thanks, Calvin. Tracy? I think Virginia and Calvin are absolutely correct. You've got to ask yourself some very difficult questions and you have to say, do I want this responsibility and do I have a vision for where I want to lead this organization? Either the unit you're responsible for or whatever is in your responsibility when I do, to Calvin's point, your you get pay for performance, so you get bonuses for how you perform, but your performance is based on having agency-wide impact. So I would say on the front end, you want to go eyes wide open knowing sort of what is being asked for me, of me, what am I prepared to do this? And if I am not, what do I need to do to prepare myself [audio problem] happy? And if it's the type of work that excites you? Like for me, I'll be honest, I didn't do the thinking on the front end. I saw position I liked, I said, OK, it comes with it. And I have learned, fortunately, that I actually enjoy this type of work. But if I did not, you are folks who are in the senior executive service right now from the last four weeks. We are helping to shepherd a number of folks sort of in and out of very complex organizations to make sure things don't fall through the cracks, to give folks up to speed, but at the same time, to manage all the change that everyone below us is really wondering what's going on, what do I do that comes with a lot of responsibility. And so if you're not excited or passionate about that work or don't believe that you can get excited and passionate about that, that type of work, you really want to ask yourself those questions, because honestly, money alone won't won't necessarily get you through the challenges that you'd face.

[00:39:01] Calvin Byrd

You know, can I add one other thing, I agree with that 100 percent, the one thing that concerned me about the SES was the mobility requirement where you could be relocated anywhere at any time. All of a sudden, your agency, they need you to transfer to Arlington, Texas. Or they need you to transfer somewhere, and your family situation may not, you know, allow that or it may be somewhat problematic. But that was one piece of the SES,

[00:39:33] Calvin Byrd

So to receive an SL, it was like a blessing in disguise because it definitely worked much better for me than being in a situation where it's all of a sudden someone mentioned that your expertise is needed somewhere else and you have a family in the Washington, D.C. area. You had to make a decision. Do you take it? But that was the big issue I think Virginia mentioned at one time. Also, the mobility issue is something that you have to think about.

[00:40:08] Virginia Huth

I'll just build on that. I in my experience, I haven't seen that happen very often where someone is transferred without their being willing to do it. But it is very true that SES have fewer civil service protections than the GS-15s and below. And so it has to do, you know, appealing your rating or, you know, suspension, all of these things, you simply don't have the same protections. And, I'm not prepared to go into detail. But, you know, you have to be aware that.

[00:40:45] Jason Briefel

Yep, thanks so much. That's a that's a whole can of worms for another day before we moved off this topic. Just wanted to see Alison, if you have any comments, things to share based on this discussion or anything you heard from from your fellow panelists.

[00:41:00] Allyson Pokres

I do not have anything to add. I'm absorbing everything that the panelists are saying. Tracy, I really appreciated your comment about how you really need to look at the SES program as a whole and not just the specific position, because I think I would have said yesterday if asked if I want to be an SES that I'm not sure, but if I happen to stumble across a position that looks like a good fit and happens to be an SES, I would go for it. And so your prior comments definitely give me something to chew on. And so I, I appreciate that, but I don't have anything to add to that.

[00:41:43] Virginia Huth

Something else. You know, this may bleed into some later questions, but, you know, relating to how do I prepare my ECQs, well you prepare your ECQs by getting experience. Right? That you can write about meaningfully. Right? And I think that experience is also a way to test yourself, to see if this is what you really want. So years ago, I actually actually I worked at the NRC with Calvin years ago, I applied into a SES candidate development program across government that was offered at the time. They only do that every 10 years or so. And luckily I was accepted and then I was placed at the the NRC. But, you know, I had been a 14 when I left government and then I was with IBM, so I had to come back in with, you know, really good ECQs for my package. Well, you know what I used? I didn't necessarily have something specific to my job for every one of them, but I had been the chair of a benefit auction for an Inner City Learning Center program, you know, after school tutoring, a volunteer program. So I'd been involved in that. And I organized the auction and we raised twenty thousand dollars. And, you know, I was able to point to other sorts of leadership type activities on my ECQs. And, you know, again, I would encourage anyone is interested in leadership to look for opportunities, whether it's leading a task force or leading a committee or, you know, whatever those responsibilities are, you know, taking the initiative. But just start practicing your leadership now in the small ways and see if it's a good fit and see, you know, and then you'll see those opportunities grow.

[00:43:34] Virginia Huth

Yeah. And then you'll have something to write in your ECQs.

[00:43:38] Jason Briefel

Thanks for sharing that, Virginia, and I think that that's a really important point that I'll re-emphasize that, you know, the the information that will feed your narrative for your ECQs does not necessarily have to come from from your work life if you're not being provided opportunities there to to hone those skills. You know, you may have opportunities in other parts of your life that present those leadership development opportunities that you can write about. Tracy, did you want to come in on this one?

[00:44:08] Tracy Carson

I think I think Virginia hit it, the only thing I will say is those are the big categories, sort of leading change leading people. When you go underneath, you'll find they're different elements within that. So an element of leading people is managing conflict or leveraging diversity. So the the other piece is understanding when they're sort of the how is the senior executive service defining what leading people means or leading change? And then as you think about the types of things you're doing in both in your professional life and in your personal life, to apply it to that criteria. Because when I when I was writing my excuse, I I'm just writing leading people, but really thinking about what are they asking for specifically and then how do you map that to what you're doing and what you hope to do and where you want to to put your emphasis moving forward.

[00:45:03] Jason Briefel

Wonderful. I'm going to take a little pivot and address another question that we got through the Q and A, and this is about work life balance.

[00:45:14] Jason Briefel

Virginia, you mentioned 50, 60 hour weeks. You know, obviously during the transition, Traci, you mentioned just it being chaos. It's we do this every four years. But hoping you could speak to to our audience about kind of how you strove to maintain that work life balance. Is that even possible at the executive level? Yeah, just just curious about your experiences with that issue.

[00:45:43] Virginia Huth

I'm happy to jump in, I don't always need to be first. Tracy, do you want to go?

[00:45:48] Virginia Huth

No, I'm happy for you to start and I'll come back, I'll tell you, you guys, that this really it has been hard. You know, when I first was accepted at the NRC into the candidate development program, sort of a little side story when I applied, I was pregnant when I interviewed, I was six months pregnant, but I wore flowing scarves over my jacket for the interview that, you know, you know, reduced it from like three hundred to ten. And then I was like the final six. Right. And then three months later, they call me, you know, and they said, OK, we're finally ready. And I'm like, oh, actually, yeah, you know, my baby's due next week. And they said.

[00:46:35] Virginia Huth

You're pregnant, and I said, oh, yeah. Then they said, were you pregnant when you interviewed three months ago? And I said, Yeah.

[00:46:46] Virginia Huth

And so there you go. I wasn't an SES yet. I was in the CDP so I was a 15. But it was it was hard. And I will say at that time, it really was one of the hardest periods. I had to spend a lot of money on child care, a lot of money. And I will say at a later stage I got au pairs. I got a live in au pair. You know, it's like it's a program organized by the State Department. They come from another country usually. And I had au pairs for seven years. And I have to say, I don't know how I would have done it. I also was a single mom for most of that time, so I really couldn't have done it without the live in help. Again, I've taken challenging positions. Maybe some others have managed it better. I don't have family in the area, you know. But, you know, some people if you've got a really strong, strong mother-in-law, father-in-law or other support systems, but I think I think you probably will need a support system to to manage.

[00:47:48] Virginia Huth

And luckily, I was able to do it. But it was hard. There's no doubt about about it.

[00:47:55] Tracy Carson

And then I'll say for me with covid it's hard, because I think it's hard for all of us, like with covid and the pandemic, we we don't know if we're working from home or just working all day or what things look like. And so I think we're all trying to figure it out in some ways. I think in a pre-covid context where things were a bit more predictable. There's ways to have work life balance. I remember one of my previous supervisors who's also said to me one time, she said, I have no problem getting up and leaving a meeting at five o'clock. I have a choice. And if it's a choice between you all, I'm picking up my daughter. I'm going to pick up my daughter because I have pick up today. And so I think in part it's managing expectations for our team, for ourselves and above, setting boundaries early and often and just realizing that as a member of the senior executive service, you often have influence. So the ability to set the tone. So you set the tone for what people are going to model, for what they expect. I think part of it is also positing the problem to the broader team to to get their ideas to say, look, we've got to accomplish ABC. I know I'm on the hook for ZYX and how do we do this in a way that is sane, logical, rational, etc. to try to figure out if there are solutions for you all, to both meet the mission, but also to to not kill yourselves and do what good are you if you are able to [technical issues] the time that you need to figure out how to to erect those boundaries. [unintelligible] leaders are the ones who they have to take care of themselves.

[00:49:39] Tracy Carson

And so when you think about that, you build in your leadership vision, your approach, that that's not negotiable, then you can really start to figure out how to set boundaries. It's hard right now with transition, a lot hitting and many different ways. But I will say it ebbs and flows. And so thinking about when it's not at one of those peaks, how do you actually from where you sit and influence, what do you want to model? What do you want to set? And how do you do that in a way that that works for you? And it means managing some expectations and having difficult conversations either with yourself or above to make it is something that you can live with.

[00:50:15] Virginia Huth

Yeah.

[00:50:16] Virginia Huth

And I agree. You know, it's important to set boundaries. I mean, obviously covid's harder, but back in the day, I would have a hard stop. I needed to leave at 4:45 to get the kids from daycare. And then I had an odd pair. So I didn't wasn't that rigorous. But I still wanted to get home and have dinner with the kids so we'd have dinner. We do our thing, but then I get on the computer again from 9-10:30 and I would just finish up all the stuff that I needed to finish so that I could, you know, level set the next day. And and one of the things I did is I didn't want to work on weekends, so sometimes I would just push through late on a Thursday or Friday to make sure that my Saturday and Sunday was clean so that I could have family time. So, you know, again, maybe you'll just be fortunate to have a 40 hour week. I know a lot of SES who do, but but some of the more challenging positions usually require more, particularly when you're leading a change effort, you know, when it's not a status quo program, but when you're leading change. But it's rewarding for me. It's been rewarding.

[00:51:17] Virginia Huth

So it's worked out. It's all worked out. My kids aren't ignored. They know they're well loved.

[00:51:24] Jason Briefel

I'll bring him in in a minute. Thanks, Virginia. I wanted to get Allyson, you know, kind of your view and tips managing through through the pandemic and then kind of Calvin's perspective on this work life issue. And then we'll get to our last question or two in our final ten minutes here. Here. So here, Alison, how has leading and managing through the pandemic been for you?

[00:51:51] Allyson Pokres

Sure. So, I mean.

[00:51:56] Allyson Pokres

It's a hard it's a hard question, I certainly have the same questions that people are asking about, you know, work life balance for the SES. I will say as a supervisor, I have between first and second line reports, I have about 20 employees plus the couple of SES that I report to. And the pandemic makes it hard. We have a lot of flexibility in my office, which I mean, you have to especially now you have to during a pandemic because people are trying to care for their children and still work full time. And so people are getting their, you know, if they're a GS employee their 40 hours wherever they can. More, I guess, if they're a SES and I remember. And so I usually log off between five and five thirty in the evening and then back on at seven, between seven and seven thirty in the morning. And I sometimes have 40 emails from that time period overnight from people who are taking off to handle child care and then making up the hours overnight.

[00:53:03] Allyson Pokres

And I remember one time in the morning talking to one of my deputies who mentioned a meeting she had had recently with my my second line supervisor. I'm the assistant inspector general above me. And I was like, when did you two meet? Why wasn't I involved in this? Oh, a couple of days ago, we realized at 10:00 at night that we were both online and we were emailing back and forth and decided we'd be easier to just talk. And so I'm like, OK, I'm glad you didn't call me and loop me in, I appreciate that. But so, I mean, during the pandemic, it's definitely been a bit hard. But I think it's great. The people are kind of making things work where they can. And it's it also seems to blur the line a little bit between the GS and the SES, because now I'm seeing more and more people who are having to essentially juggle two jobs if they're home schooling or whatnot. So it seems like everyone's working all hours of the night, but then, wondering if, you know, is this something the SES do all the time? Because it looks it looks tough, so it's definitely a challenge now but something I also consider and trying to plan for my future.

[00:54:19] Jason Briefel

Thanks for sharing that, Allyson. Calvin, I want to bring you in on, I'm kind of just the work life balance issue. I know it's a huge consideration for folks. And then we'll move to our last question.

[00:54:31] Calvin Byrd

Absolutely. In my business, security and emergency management, it's always a 24/7 operation throughout my career because in my career you have to look at threats, vulnerabilities and consequences. And you had to be right, you know, 100 percent of the time, you know, that one time you're wrong and the bad guy wins, you know, that's the day you have to explain yourself. So you know the work life balance. You have to delegate.

[00:55:07] Calvin Byrd

You had to delegate some responsibilities to individuals who you have trained and you trust, and they can carry on the mission while at the same time you have to, as a leader, make sure that all of the actions have been taken care of. And it is your responsibility to make sure that you have properly looked at the threats where you're vulnerable when you have some type of mitigation strategies, and then you have to assess the consequences. You know, what if something happens, what is going to be the consequence? And can you live with that? Can you accept it or do you have to take that issue to the head of the agency, ask for additional people, additional money, additional resources in a sense? But security never sleeps. So, you know, my wife and family, they have long realized that I have the 24/7 operation. I can get a call at any time. But again, delegation is responsible. But if something happens, if you have delegated, you take the blame because it's your responsibility, and a good leader, also, a leader will give credit to the employees and take accountability for the missteps and you learn from your mistakes. They are learning opportunities.

[00:56:33] Jason Briefel

Thanks so much, Calvin. Appreciate that. I know we're close to two o'clock, Maria is telling me we do not have a hard stop so we can spill a little bit over. Virginia does have a hard stop. That's A-OK. Tracey does, too. These are busy folks.

[00:56:49] Jason Briefel

You guys know their senior executives. I'll open up our last question here. Maybe we can do a lightning round on this one before Virginia and Tracey have to hop for their next thing. But kind of just perspective as women; Calvin, as a person of color, Tracy as a person of color pursuing leadership in the federal government. Any tips, perspective, words of wisdom to share? You know, I was actually looking at the 2018 states the last time OPM released them, and the score is still 78% white and only has 35% percent women. So we, we know we have work to do there. Virginia, Tracy? And then I'll go to Allyson and then Calvin and kind of just curious about that on the leadership is an issue.

[00:57:38] Virginia Huth

It is an issue. I see it for minorities and I still see it for women. And I won't give you my Me Too stories here, but I do have a few, unfortunately. Nothing really bad, but very distasteful, I think and hope that the environment has been changing the last few years. But I would say to anyone, you know, you need to look out for yourself and find people who will help you look forward, because there is still a lot of bias in the federal government. And, you know, and I don't think it's it's again, it's this unconscious bias in many cases. But that actually makes it more, almost more difficult. Right? People aren't aware of the impact they have on others and the way their behaviors are encouraging or discouraging things in the environment. So be an advocate, find your team and and, you know, go for the opportunities and believe in yourself.

[00:58:38] Jason Briefel

Thanks Virginia. Tracy?

[00:58:40] Tracy Carson

A couple of things. First, remember, you're probably the only person who's doubting you. I, part of my not wanting to do it was not believing that I could do it. I can't take this on. I can't do it. And I had a number of people in my ear basically saying, you got this, you can do it. And knowing when you when other people are signaling to you you're ready for this and you might be the only person doubting yourself. Second thing, make sure you get mentors. And I'll be honest, you're going to have to oftentimes get mentors who do not look like you. In my agency right now. There are less than five African-American women who are in the senior executive service based on what the agency has reported out of hundreds of positions. So if I'm waiting around to to get a mentor who has my exact background, I'm going to be looking for a long time. So part of it is you're going to have to have conversations that they get you out of your comfort zone to really interact with people who come from a different background and who can offer a different perspective. And then I'd be remiss if I didn't say I think we have a real big opportunity here. There are so many conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion taking place in America in general. But in in the federal government, I think a real part of the dialog is going to be what do we mean when we say that diversity that matters, an inclusive environment that involves actually driving change to our organizational cultures, which are difficult long term conversations and marrying that with real institutional change? But I think we've got a real moment and a real opportunity.

[01:00:08] Tracy Carson

I say if you are coming from a traditionally underrepresented minority background, particularly one that is incredibly underrepresented, you've got to think about your strategy and your approach very intentionally, because you've really got to focus on expanding out your mentor base in ways that you may not otherwise imagine. But you are often the only person doubting you.

[01:00:29] Virginia Huth

I'm going to run, guys. Thanks a lot for the opportunity. Good luck.

[01:00:33] Maria DeFazio

Thank you again so much for joining us. Thank you, Tracy.

[01:00:37] Jason Briefel

I wanted to give Allyson and Calvin a chance to address this, and then we'll hand things back over to Maria to take us out.

[01:00:45] Allyson Pokres

Sure. Well well, really quickly, I think I would just reiterate a lot of what Tracy and what Virginia said in recognizing that it is an issue, especially in when you get to leadership in the government. I've done some analyzing of statistics within my own agency, and we do a great job with diversity at the entry level. And then as you go up the chain, you get less and less good. And then once you're at the 14, 15 and SES you definitely notice a drop off in diversity, both in terms of gender and in terms of race and national origin. And the one thing I'll say is it's promising that we're at a place and now we're we're doing this analysis and it's recognized by people above me that this is an issue. I'm not, you know it's not like I decided to start doing this. It came from the top that we need to look at this and really start analyzing whether we need to make changes. And so I'm I'm hopeful that we're we're moving in the right direction. And I think that's that's promising. And I'm really excited about where we're going. There's a lot of work to do, but I'm getting the impression that people, the most senior levels are, in fact, wanting to do that work.

[01:02:10] Jason Briefel

It's wonderful to hear Allyson. Tone from the top really does matter. Calvin, want to hear from you on this and then we'll go over to Maria.

[01:02:20] Calvin Byrd

Yes, in terms of achieving the SES, being a Black male, I must say it's a difficult challenge. There was no doubt about it. But my advice to other Black males or minorities and women is to make sure that you have a portfolio that's the best of the best. You want to make it very difficult for the decision makers to reject your application. When they look at your application, they should go, wow, you know, how can we not hire this individual? I'll be very honest. There were occasions when I had applied for these positions, and I believe that selecting officials thought that I was white because I was a graduate of the University of Maryland, worked on the presidential task force, a lot of things about my credentials. But there's nothing in there that would really indicate race. And whether or not that played into to my non-selection. I don't know. But again, my advice to minorities is to be the best of the best of the best and make it very difficult for someone to decline your application and not hire you. You want them to say, my goodness, they have to have a guilt trip if they did not hire you and you have done all the things that you should have done, you punched all the tickets, you've done all the things that the textbooks said you should have done, you have prepared your ECQs with the challenge, context, the results, and the actions and the results. And you're so far above the crowd that there will be a question mark coming from the Equal Rights Office if you weren't selected. And that question marks shouldn't be coming from you, but it should be coming from someone else to say, why wasn't this person selected for that position? So, again, you need mentors, you need sponsors, someone who can bang the table and say this person should be considered. And if they are those who are in the role making decisions that have some reason other than merit and qualifications that you're not selected, they should be held accountable and brought to task.

[01:04:58] Jason Briefel

Thank you so much, Calvin. Really appreciate you, Calvin Byrd, Allyson Pokres, Virginia Huth and Tracy Carson from joining us for this great session today. Maria, back over to you.

[01:05:12] Maria DeFazio

Excellent. So I have dropped in the chat, the senior executive service website. I'm going to do a quick screen share just to make sure that everybody's got all the information.

[01:05:27] Maria DeFazio

If you want to learn more about becoming a member of the SES or becoming a senior leader, you can go to seniorexecs.org. The SEA has a lot of information, training opportunities, tools that you can use to help get your ECQs ready, which you can probably start doing before you get all the way to the 15, you know, start thinking ahead. So definitely visit senior execs. We're going to be doing some more work with them over the course of the year to like to line up more of these great opportunities together. So we are always, always happy to to partner with and host. Thank you, Jason. Thank you, everyone on the panel. Again, folks, if you've got other questions, ideas for Couchella session, stuff you'd love to see us doing, hit us up at pmf.alums@gmail.com. You can visit us on our website, pmaa.us. We're going to be sharing new Couchella sessions with with the schedule as well as opportunities to volunteer to work with PMAA in the coming months. So please continue to check your email for our newsletter, check our social media. And thank you all so very much. We'll see you next month.

[01:06:43] Maria DeFazio

Thank you, everybody.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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