



# PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROBERT TOBIAS



## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS:

### DR. BOB TOBIAS

Director of Public Sector Executive Education and the Director of the Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation at American University

### CATHY WRIGHT

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### STEVE KRASKE

I'm Steve Kraske and this is the Overland Resource Group podcast series, Profiles and Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement. These are stories about the surprising results that organizations achieve by experimenting with alternative approaches to working collaboratively, empowering employees and leading more creatively. These stories are told by leaders of corporations, government agencies and the unions which represent their workforces, as well as leading experts in the field of organizational change.

This series is underwritten by Overland Resource Group, a change leadership consultancy bringing transformative results to organizations for over 30 years. Today we hear from Bob Tobias, Director of Public Sector Executive Education and the Director of the Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation at American University.

Tobias also serves in numerous capacities in the federal sector, including a Senate confirmed position on the US Internal Revenue Service Oversight Board. He served on several committees that examine a variety of federal agency issues, including a taskforce to review and make recommendations about the US Department of Defense National Security Personnel System. Prior to his work at American University Bob served for 31 years with the National Treasury Employees Union, and from 1983 to 1999 as its President. He brings a unique blend of skills and background, as well as experience. Bob Tobias spoke with Cathy Wright.

### CATHY WRIGHT

Bob, you have a unique perspective of someone who has sat in a lot of different chairs, both as a long term federal sector union leader, as an advisor now on public policy issues, speaking, writing, teaching leadership skills to public service leaders, and from these multiple vantage points what do you think it is that makes it so difficult for labor and management to figure out how to work collaboratively?



**BOB TOBIAS**

I think it's basically the assumptions that we develop about the other; the unchallenged assumptions that we develop about the other. If I'm a union leader I assume that the manager doesn't care about me; isn't interested in talking to me, is not open to my ideas and my interests. If I'm a manager I assume that the union leader has no other interest other than her own, and that the interests of employees will come in favor of the organization's interests. So if those assumptions are unchallenged, unexplored, inevitably it's a very competitive, adversarial environment.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

And so often too, Bob, we find that a lot of what contributes to that is that the parties aren't having opportunities for any proactive conversation. It's all reactive and it's typically on a confrontational basis, so they're not getting together to talk about their interests at all.

**BOB TOBIAS**

Exactly; and I think that starts for most relationships in the organizing drive. Unions usually organize people who have issues, have problems with the management, so those are leveraged into a campaign where the employees vote for the union. And during the campaign usually the union, in order to help itself win the election, is not portraying the management group in a very nice light. Inevitably the management leaders think the union leaders are not very nice and attacking them personally, so they start in a hole before they've ever met each other. So that often, I've found, carries over for years before someone says, "Oh my goodness, that was ten years ago when that happened. What's going on now?"

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Yeah; and we're still living in the past.

**BOB TOBIAS**

Correct.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Wow; good point, Bob. That leads me to my next question and you having spent many, many years as a union leader yourself, today I see someone who I would describe as highly collaborative, constantly working to build consensus in a lot of different kinds of settings, and I'm just curious if that's the same Bob Tobias I would have seen when you were at the helm of NTEU, and when you were in that role what made it possible or what made it difficult to be a collaborative union leader when you were at Treasury?

**BOB TOBIAS**

If you had met me prior to probably 1983 or 1984 you would not have seen much collaboration in my life. That was sort of the Wild West time of union organizing in the federal sector. The word collaboration had not been discovered and the only thing each party knew was adversarial. In the mid '80s I was able to begin, the early nascent stages, to start thinking about and working on in fits and starts a more collaborative relationship in the IRS.

From that point on I came to see the value of collaborative relationships

from a union perspective, of giving me an opportunity to participate and be involved in a whole lot of issues that were otherwise non negotiable. So I liked that a lot because as the representative of employees, in a situation where the scope of bargaining is very narrow, being able to talk about issues of importance to employees that are not bargainable, is a very good thing. So I found supporting those kinds of efforts to be very beneficiary to the people that I represented.

Now, I never gave up the other tools, the adversarial tools and there were some managers, some heads of agencies who did not have the time nor the patience, nor even the willingness, to explore their assumption, and as a result continued in adversarial relationships. So I would say that the trajectory from the mid '80s until the end of the Clinton Administration was towards more collaboration. However, there were pockets of agency leaders who never adapted a more collaborative approach.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

And probably still are today?

**BOB TOBIAS**

It would be my guess.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Yes. Bob, you make an interesting point I want to follow up on because you talk about having two sets of tools - the collaborative tools and the adversarial. I imagine, as a union leader, it requires a certain amount of finesse to walk in both sets of shoes and to pull out both the adversarial toolbox when you need to and the collaborative when you need to. How did you manage that? How did that work for you?

**BOB TOBIAS**

It worked best when I was totally transparent and made clear that this is a situation that required us to go to arbitration, that we could not settle it, it couldn't be resolved and so we had to go to arbitration, but that it shouldn't poison the rest of our relationship. That worked out pretty well.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

And the flip side of this now, Bob, it's interesting that today your role is really working to develop leadership skill among executives and people on the management side of the house at the agencies. What do you say that gets in the way of leaders from management when they're trying to work more collaboratively? What are the things that they have to overcome?

**BOB TOBIAS**

You know; the issue of conflict management - I frame it as managing conflict for positive results - is in the workplace everywhere, but 80 percent of the federal workforce are knowledge workers. So if I'm hired for my knowledge and you're hired for your knowledge and we came from different places, we've had different experiences, different universities, grew up in different places, we're going to have a different perspective about what ought to happen. If we have a different perspective that means we have conflict.

Now, if I assume that you're out to get me and you assume that I'm out to get you and the only way that we can resolve this conflict is through arm wrestling, then that's the way we're going to behave. If instead, we figure out what our interests are and how to address them and how to expand the opportunities for resolution through interest based problem solving, we will be able easily to adopt that approach in the labor/management arena. It will be an extension of the way we behave on a day to day basis. So I see my work with managers introducing interest based problem solving to be a tool that can be used in every conflict situation, no matter who the parties are.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

It makes so much sense. Quite often I think people are very familiar with the concept of interest based negotiation but they don't seem to make the leap to understand that it's not a skillset you have to reserve for the negotiating table; it's a better skillset to be using in your everyday leadership.

**BOB TOBIAS**

Exactly.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

So Bob, what do you think it is that leaders really, from both sides, labor and management, what should they seek to do differently, to do more of or less of to really try to cultivate lasting collaborative relationships?

**BOB TOBIAS**

I think oftentimes those who are in adversarial relationships focus their entire effort on the other party. If only the other party would - if only the other party would change everything would be great around here which, when you think about it, puts me in a very helpless situation because I have to wait for you to change before I can realize what's good for me. So I really urge parties to identify what they want, what they need and why they need it so that they can be proactive. If I can be proactive about what I need, why I need it and what my interests are, I can have a conversation with you if you do the same. Then it's free of blame but rather focused on the problem, as opposed to you and I find that that's really one of the ways to get parties thinking forward, as opposed to being anchored in the past about what happened five years ago or ten years or 20 years ago.

It also moves them out of that sort of victim mentality, that I'm helpless in the equation. It really puts them more in a position of power.

**BOB TOBIAS**

Exactly.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

One of the things we hear frequently in the federal sector, especially as we were reentering, is that leaders would say to us, well, what works in the private sector really doesn't work in the public sector. We're different. We don't have a Board of Directors to contend with; we have congress to contend with and we have to deal with bureaucracies and politics and unions that are different in X, Y and Z way. And I'm curious, Bob, in your view are the concepts and practices

of labor/management collaboration transferrable between the two sectors and how are the challenges and opportunities of working collaboratively, different between government and business?

**BOB TOBIAS**

Well, the commonality is how am I going to solve the problems that I have in the workplace? That's what's common. Now, if I'm working in a manufacturing plant it's different than if I'm working for HHS, but it's not so different if I'm at an army arsenal repairing tanks; very much the same.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Sure.

**BOB TOBIAS**

So the commonality is that there are problems in the workplace, now do I address those problems? What kind of a problem solving process do I have in place? Is it adversarial or is it collaborative that's common? Now, what's different is that the scope of bargaining is larger in the private sector than it is in the federal sector. There are Boards of Directors as opposed to congress. There are government accountability offices and inspector generals in the federal sector and not in the private sector, but I think that's missing the point.

The real point is how am I solving the problems in the workplace? And if I can create the relationship with sufficient trust, that we can work to solve the problems, then it's advantageous to the manager, more efficiency and more effectiveness. It's advantageous to employees, particularly in the federal sector who come to the federal sector because they're attracted to the mission of agencies so if they get involved in solving problems which increases the chance of accomplishing the mission, they're satisfied.

And union leaders are satisfied because they are creating a process where their members are realizing or actualizing the reason they came to work in the federal government and that is to make a difference. So yes, it's a difference but I think it's very much the same.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Bob, that also reminds me, we were so struck when we came in and began working in the Federal Aviation Administration, and when we talked to employee, both supervisory level and right down to the first line workers, it wasn't just that they were aware of the mission of their agency, it was almost a calling. And we contrasted that with - quite often in the private sector you talk to employees and they'll say, "Yeah, there is a mission statement around here somewhere." They'd walk you through a hallway and point to a framed document on the wall. But when you talk to a lot of people in the federal sector they can quote you line and verse the mission of the agency and it very much is a passion for them and something they're very committed to and have top of mind. To your point, I think you're spot on there; that is a big difference.

**BOB TOBIAS**

It is a huge difference.



**CATHY WRIGHT**

And it says a lot about the caliber of people that choose to work in the federal government, I would add.

**BOB TOBIAS**

But the trick is to leverage rather than ignore that calling.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Absolutely.

**BOB TOBIAS**

And the only way it can be leveraged is if you include it and evolve those employees in addressing the problems in the workplace. If you exclude them you're not leveraging that energy and that passion.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

It brings up a good point, Bob. I know that you've worked for many years in the federal sector in surveying employees and federal agencies, and trying to get a handle on levels of employee engagement. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about what is the parallel between labor/management collaboration and what you see in terms of workforce engagement?

**BOB TOBIAS**

Well, if you look at the agencies, the top ten agencies in the best places to work survey over the years, they're all organized workplaces. Frankly, 80 percent of those eligible to be represented by a union are represented by a union in the federal government. So in the last survey the FDIC was number one. Highly organized by the National Treasury Employees Union. So if I'm an employee and I have an opportunity to be engaged in addressing the problems that I face in the workplace, that's going to show up in the employee viewpoint survey that is the basis for calculating the best places to work in the federal government.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

I want to check into Bob, with you, on the White Paper that you partnered with two of your colleagues from Wayne State and Syracuse Universities back in February 2010 called Engaging Federal Employees through their Union Representatives to Improve Agency Performance. And in that paper you all did a beautiful job of sharing a history of labor/management relations in the federal sector. You talked about best practices and lessons learned, and ultimately you made recommendations about what you all conclude is required to build and really sustain collaborative efforts.

And in the closing of that paper you all note, "The potential for gain is real if the parties are willing to make the commitment." And I'm curious almost three years later, from the time you all drafted and published that paper, have you seen progress? Have you seen real gains and labor and management parties being willing to make the commitment it takes to be successful?

**BOB TOBIAS**

I've seen gains but not nearly as much gain as I'd hoped. I think that I underestimated the damage of the Bush presidency because when George W Bush was elected President the first thing that he did was to sign an Executive

Order rescinding the Executive Order that President Clinton had signed creating labor management partnership in the federal sector.

Now, what that did was, what it represented was a swing back from collaboration to adversarial. So the history of labor/management relations in the federal sector was adversarial from '62 to '92, '92 to 2000 trending towards collaborative. 2000 to '08 back to the mattresses and now Obama signed a new Executive Order. So if I'm a union leader who wants to get elected do I jump back into the collaborative pond when I've noticed that many of my colleagues got un-elected because they were caught out when Bush rescinded the Executive Order and everybody lost all that they had gained in terms of collaboration? Or should I wait and see? How should I behave, given this new set? Is Obama going to really push hard to make this happen? So there has been a much more hesitancy than I thought there would be. Many more scars than I thought there would be, on both sides, about how quickly to jump into the water.

Now, what I have found is that those agencies who have really wanted to make change and had the responsibility for making significant change, have been the leaders in creating new labor/management relationships because they recognized that without collaboration they can't get the change they seek, implemented while they are political appointees, that the unions can block an awful lot of what they want to do. So that recognition, agency officials have approached unions and there have been some very significant work done, but not on as broad a basis as I had anticipated or hoped.

## **CATHY WRIGHT**

And it seems to me it also takes a different caliber leader to be willing to wade into those waters in some regards. It always strikes me that even if adversarial relations are unpleasant it's sometimes easier to keep doing what you're familiar with and maintain that status quo than to strike out in a bold new direction, both for labor and management.

## **BOB TOBIAS**

Well, yes, there is no question about that, but here is the way I would put it. The people who can really hasten the creation of a collaborative labor/management relationship are political appointees. Now they are, for the most part, involved in public policy creation rather than public policy implementation, but when they see that they can't get anything done on the implementation field unless they collaborate with the union, when they see that and start creating relationships at that level, then the rest of the agency quickly follows.

## **CATHY WRIGHT**

Good point. Bob, given that span of history that you've seen and studied in the federal sector, where do you think we are today? So when we're telling the history of this moment and place in time down the road, what do you think we'll be saying? Would we say this is the best of times, the worst of times or



just plain uncertain times?

**BOB TOBIAS**

I would say this is the best opportunity that we've ever had in the history of federal sector labor relations to move this program forward, because the Executive Order is in place and the Executive Order that Obama issued requires unions and management to create measurable outcome, goals and objectives of their effort, and if they do that it will take the personality driven labor/management relationships off the table. And decisions whether to have a collaborative labor/management relationship will be based on, from the management point of view, do I have better organizational results, and from the union point of view do I have people who are energetically engaged in improving the agency? That will be the measure; not whether I like the other guy or not, but whether the other guy likes me, and that's what we found that drove those labor/management relationships during the Bush years to survive collaboratively. Where both parties recognized that they were advantaged in a measureable way; they stayed in business. The federal sector and labor community has that chance now, with four more years of Obama, so I think it's a tremendous opportunity.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

And contrast that too, Bob, we have on the one hand a tremendous opportunity for labor and for collaborative approaches; at the same time when I talk to union leaders what I hear consistently is that they are very much feeling that labor as an institution is under attack. Are you seeing that and sensing that from your perspective?

**BOB TOBIAS**

Of course; of course I am. So how is the best way to fight off those kinds of attacks? Proving value.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Aah!

**BOB TOBIAS**

Proving value. I don't have to worry about being attacked if I can say, "Hey, look, as a result of our joint effort we saved 20 million bucks. You want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg or do you want to create some more golden eggs?"

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Good point. It's sounds cliché but that's really the win win, isn't it?

**BOB TOBIAS**

It is.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

One of the questions, Bob, that I frequently ask people when I'm interviewing them for this series, stems from a comment that you made when we had dinner recently and it's really stuck with me. You said one of the biggest failures of effective collaborative process is that labor and management settle for respectful relations instead of real achievement. Can you say more about what you mean by that?



**BOB TOBIAS**

What I meant was if I settle for you being nice and being civil with me, I've given up the opportunity to really do the hard work of improving the organization. If I give up the really hard work then my members aren't going to be involved and they're not going to have that feeling of engagement and passion that I have the opportunity to provide.

And you, the manager, if you settle for me being nice to you and writing bad editorials about you in my union newspaper, you've given up the chance of doing what you must do, and that is improving your efficiency and effectiveness in a time of reduced resources, so being nice is no deal.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

And truly I think the value, when we have good collaborative processes in place, back to the win win, that's when you've really got the opportunity to join forces and point at things that challenge the organization, whether it's improving efficiency or improving quality of work life or cutting costs in this environment, where you can really get everybody pointed in the same direction, in lockstep, driving towards real achievement. It's a great opportunity.

**BOB TOBIAS**

It is.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

I want to focus forward a bit, Bob, and ask in reference to your long career and your varied involvement in this labor management field, if you were handed the magic Bob Tobias wand and you could change any one thing that you think would most impact the state of labor/management relations, both today and in the future, what would you do with that wand? What would be the thing you would focus on changing?

**BOB TOBIAS**

If I could wave my magic wand I would remove the respective party's Armour as they approached each other in their first meeting.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Oh; okay, so being willing and able to be a bit vulnerable?

**BOB TOBIAS**

To be vulnerable, open and available. I need your help. It's so hard to say, "I need your help," and yet when a manager can say, "I need your help," it's very hard to say no.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Yeah; and I think sometimes people have a mistaken impression that that's about giving up power, when in fact it's using it to better advantage

**BOB TOBIAS**

That's a fact.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

I want to ask you too, Bob; we've often laughed about our first meeting — I think it was over coffee and breakfast - and we pretty immediately realized we were kindred spirits in that we really both steadfastly believe in the power of

collaboration and that it can in fact transform organizations. I'm curious when you think about this work, what is it that gives you hope and that keeps you waging this battle that you've been waging for all these years to try to foster greater collaboration? What brings you hope?

**BOB TOBIAS**

When I speak about collaboration to someone who has never experienced it, it's an intellectual experience. When someone participates in the collaborative process it's a head and a heart impact because I recognize that if I work with you collaboratively something new, something different, something better than I ever envisioned gets created.

So when I'm working with you and something new and different and better gets created I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from that. So my hope is that more people will have that head and heart experience, because once you've had it it's very hard for you to go back.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Great point. I never cease to be amazed at what groups can accomplish when they work collaboratively and I never cease to be delighted when they're surprised by that discovery.

**BOB TOBIAS**

I use a very simple set of facts in my class to provide an experience for interest based problem solving, and it involves five employees and three of them wanted to take annual leave at the same time, or overlapping times. The challenge to the group is to create a process that will both solve the immediate problem and create a policy for the future.

Now, I've done this exercise, who knows, hundreds of times; hundreds of times, and yet no one group has ever created a solution but it's exactly the same as another group. And yet, when a solution emerges those who participated in creating it, are ecstatic, and of course from their perspective it's the best possible solution because it emanated from who they are. So what it points out is that oftentimes there is no one right solution; there is only a solution that people will enthusiastically support. So once I've had that experience and I can see that, you know, "Hey, I'm on to something because I think it's so damn good," it's really often foolish.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Right; and the possibilities are endless.

**BOB TOBIAS**

Exactly; your best solution.

**CATHY WRIGHT**

Yeah; that's great. Bob, I hate that we have to wrap up. I could continue the conversation all day. I want to thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today, Bob, and share your perspective. It's been a real pleasure and it's great to have you as a kindred spirit out there doing this work and driving collaboration forward. Thank you.



## **BOB TOBIAS**

You're very welcome; thank you for asking, Cathy.

## **STEVE KRASKE**

That's Bob Tobias, Director of Public Sector Executive Education and the Director of the Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation at American University. He spoke with Cathy Wright. This Profile and Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement interview was brought to you by Overland Resource Group. For a transcript or more information visit their website at [orginc.com](http://orginc.com) — that's [orginc.com](http://orginc.com), or email them at [workingtogether@orginc.com](mailto:workingtogether@orginc.com).