

How a city official can outperform a private sector executive

By Raj Verma

tems, government, by definition, is synonymous with waste, inefficiency and corruption. Our system is no different. Recent indictments of several elected officials in South Florida has reinforced that belief. The run-away benefits, which never attracted talented professionals when the times were good, have now become a public anathema. If, in this context, I proclaim that in certain areas, our local governments can do better than the private sector, I'll be told to get my head examined. And rightfully so — only if I hadn't been successful four times in my 24 years of public service.

It is my belief — I don't speak for my employer or any organization — that no entity, including large corporations, has more talents than local governments under one roof. It may not always be sufficient to invent something. But it's a large pool of resources woefully underutilized that almost always goes to waste. Politics, election management, policy development, public relations, infrastructure planning/development, finance, accounting, risk management, engineering, construction, information technology, legal, police and fire. And this is the winning combination if talents could be integrated. The question is whether there is determination and a work-culture, where politics is clearly separated from service delivery for the residents. If yes, the private sector can be surpassed — guaranteed!

As director of public works/services, I have determined that privatization is not

to expediency. The net result is cost overruns thanks to inept public officials?

Out of over 30 projects that I have planned, designed and built with millions of dollars in savings, two recent ones in Coconut Creek prove my point. In 2009, the Florida Department of Transportation awarded a \$450,000 grant to the city for a \$900,000 project to landscape two miles of medians on State Road 7. At first glance, I knew we could save at least \$200,000 by doing simple tasks in-house while contracting out the specialized work.

But I also knew that unless I challenged our field staff, it would be business as usual. It was in this setting that I assembled approximately 20 employees from five departments/divisions. I asked them if they could bring the project cost down. With the exception of isolated, half-hearted attempts, the resultant reaction was ostensibly mute. Like an instructor and sitting in a back-seat, I asked one of the supervisors to go to the board and list all the components of the project. After initial hesitation, grudgingly perhaps, the exercise developed its own momentum and there was no stopping. Slugging out among themselves, they successfully carved out in-house work from the contractual. The meeting ended with comments like: "No one ever explained to us like this before." "We can do it!" "When can we start?"

Eleven months later, the project got completed with an approximate savings of \$400,000. In an identical exercise, when

to occupy these slack pockets. Unfortunately, concepts like multi-tasking, resource-sharing, reducing bureaucracy or consolidation are inherently alien to the public sector. Every agency gloats about somehow being special. But in reality they are not. Inefficient working at many levels is a huge burden on the economy that rarely finds any mention in our discourse. The private sector is no different. If it is incompetence in the public sector, it's the insatiable desire for profit-making in the private. Simple solutions routinely get dragged for months to get resolved. In our country, where the super majority does not know how its governments or systems work, adds to the contempt.

To accomplish success, much rests on the shoulders of county and city managers along with the political leadership. But if the vision is focused more on self-preservation, political survival and huge payouts at separation, which is how the present system is set up, the medusa of inefficiency, and privatization as a panacea, would continue to haunt the public sector. To be truly effective, there must be hands-off approach by politicians after they have set policies. Those who want to do the right things right must be encouraged for their value and ethics. Contrary to the general perception, I have yet to come across a newcomer who wants to start his/her job as a lousy employee. But over a short course, the same employee degenerates into a "loser?" Why? Thank cronyism, political interference, victimization, pref-

panacea to inefficiency and monetary woes faced by the local governments

Raj Verma, Public Services Director for Coconut Creek

employees through effective leadership. It is absolutely critical that an honest and fair working environment be created. The two recent examples cited above in Coconut Creek are just reaffirmations. I do not believe I did anything special other than being honest, fair and challenging the organization's stationary inertia. Standing up for employees when they were right and disciplining them when they were wrong provided their own obfuscating moments. And those moments were never popular, squeezing me from all sides. However, when the employees saw that I stood up for their cause and led them by example, ownership and commitment became a natural sequel. Other than periodic verification, I didn't have to supervise them. They knew what was expected and they delivered — resulting in savings to be shared by the entire organization.

Being a change agent and challenging the status-quo is not easy. It is not for faint hearted professionals as it regularly invites scorn, coercion and threats from bosses and politicians even when they know you are right. My reward has been palpable; I was hired as a department head 24 years ago and will retire as a depart-