



Leadership and Governance in Challenging Times Fall 2021

Tom Perez, Visiting Fellow at the Watson Institute

Welcome to our Study Group that will explore problem solving in today's challenging world. This Study Group will meet the following six Mondays this semester:

September 27, October 4, October 18, October 25, November 1, November 8

Each session will meet from 1-2:30pm.

In today's turbulent times, the journey to form a more perfect union often appears as difficult as ever. The “shortest distance” theory feels to so many as if it is seldom part of the playbook of progress in Washington, DC or elsewhere. A host of factors have created an atmosphere of hyper partisanship in which effective governance is elusive, and principled compromise is frequently derided as a four-letter word. As a result, public confidence in our public institutions, especially at the federal level, is at a low ebb.

I have had the privilege throughout nearly three decades of public service to work in all three branches of the federal government, as well as in state and local government. I have had the privilege of running for office, leading federal and state agencies (large and small), and working on Capitol Hill for Senator Edward Kennedy. Most recently, I led the Democratic National Committee from 2017 until earlier this year. I have experienced success and setbacks. My education at Brown laid an important ethical and academic foundation for my future work. At the same time, as a student, I frequently observed that there was a wide gap between what I was learning in the classroom, and how things actually got done in the real world.

A principal goal of this Study Group is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Specifically, I want to give you a front row seat to problem solving in and around a government setting—the “how does it really happen (or not happen)” dimension that is often absent from traditional classroom dialogue.

The broader goals of the Study Group are:

1. Bridging theory and practice and asking important normative questions - As noted above, this Study Group will dig into the nitty gritty of problem solving at a federal, state and local level, that is, the “how does it really happen” dimension. Through a series of case studies tackling the issues outlined above, we will examine how problems get solved (or fail to get solved), and identify and wrestle with a variety of legal, administrative, communications, political, and other considerations. Equally importantly, we will examine the normative questions of how should these vexing challenges be resolved. As we dissect vexing issues, I will challenge you to “build a better mousetrap,” that is, devise a better way to bring seemingly warring factions together.
2. Interacting with Leaders who have been in the fray- Throughout the semester, participants will hear from a series of guest speakers who will reflect on their experiences and offer their insights into how they tackled (or were tackled by) a particular challenge.
3. Introducing a Problem Solving Paradigm- While every issue is different, and many problems require unique approaches and a healthy dose of creative thinking and mid course correction, there are some basic tenets of problem solving that can frequently guide a leader’s actions. Throughout the semester, you will be introduced to a problem-solving framework that can guide action in a variety of settings.
4. Wrestling with Ethical Challenges- Invariably, ethical challenges will arise in the course of wrestling with a particular issue, and the cases studies will allow you to work through these issues, and develop a framework for resolution.
5. Wrestling with Leadership Challenges- The issues that we will discuss raise important questions about leadership. Throughout the semester, we will step back and understand principles of leadership that can be gleaned from the issue at hand.
6. Learning to how to debate hot button issues in a professional manner- Many of the issues that will be addressed in this Study Group are hot button issues for which there are passionate views on each side. Our goal is to create a robust space in which participants can learn how to advocate with passion and mutual respect, that is, learning how to disagree without being disagreeable. This is increasingly a lost art in Washington, DC and elsewhere.

7. Inspiring Careers in Public Service- Times may be chaotic, and one might be tempted to run away from public service. It is a goal of this Study Group to inspire you to pursue a career in public service by gaining a more granular understanding of the remarkable opportunities that present themselves to build a more perfect union. While I have undoubtedly had some challenging, unpleasant moments, and no shortage of setbacks, I treasure the opportunities I have had to work in public service, and I hope to persuade you to follow or discover your passion for public service.

Upcoming Classes

I have an outline for the first four classes, and I want to get your input on topics for the final two classes. The first four classes will cover the following topics:

Class One (September 27) - Introduction and Problem Solving Paradigm
(Read Problem Solving Paradigm attached to this Syllabus)

Class Two (October 4)- Voting Rights in America- Ensuring the Right to Vote for All Eligible Voters: Addressing Current Challenges and Opportunities

Class Three (October 18)- Governing During a Pandemic- Addressing One State's Effort to Assist Unemployed Residents During the Pandemic.

Class Four (October 25)- The Role of the Press in Today's Turbulent Times

With the exception of Class One, where the only reading is the Fact Pattern attached to this syllabus, you will receive readings for each class. I will try not to overload you with reading materials. At the same time, these materials will provide useful foundation for the classroom discussion. In addition, I will have guest speakers for a number of these classes. I encourage you to google each speaker so that you will learn more about them and be prepared to ask questions. For each guest speaker, I will begin the class with a series of questions for the speaker and then turn over the majority of the class to you for questions and frank discussion.

In addition, I will attempt to arrange lunches or other informal get togethers to continue our discussions, or address issues of mutual interest. I will have office hours each week, and am more than willing to brainstorm with you about topics discussed in class, or discuss your career goals, or job interests. I have gotten to know a number of students in previous Study Groups well, and look forward to getting to know you.

Leadership and Governance in Challenging Times

Week One: Introduction and Problem Solving Paradigm

September 27, 2021

The assignment for class one is to study the Fact Pattern outlined below and be prepared to help your client.

Fact Pattern

PODER Rhode Island is a grassroots nonprofit organization in Providence that serves the low income immigrant populations of Rhode Island. PODER has 20 employees and has a number of divisions, including the following:

- Employment and Training Center, which helps place clients in jobs;
- Education Department, which provides English classes and vocational training programs;
- Advocacy Department, which does legislative advocacy at a state and local level on behalf of clients; and
- Legal Department, which provides legal services.

Juan Osuna is a Providence resident who is an immigrant from Guatemala. He would love to find a full time job so that he can take care of his wife and two small children, and continue to send money home to his mother in Guatemala. He has had trouble finding regular work, and as a result, is living day to day, week to week. His mother relies on his remittances to buy medicine. Juan worked for the past four weeks at Restaurante Estrella in North Providence. He worked there once before for two weeks and liked the work because he got paid in cash at the end of each shift.

Restaurante Estrella has some of the least expensive entrees in North Providence, and does a robust business, including many political leaders. He came to your office because although he was promised \$11 dollars an hour, he has not been paid. When he asked his supervisor, he was told that his work was substandard and he did not deserve to be paid. His supervisor fired him and threatened to report him to immigration services if he filed a complaint.

You are part of the Senior Leadership team at PODER, and you were handling case intake on the day that Juan came in seeking your help.

1. What are your potential options for assisting Juan?
2. What additional information do you need to know in order to make informed recommendations to Juan?
3. What do you think is Juan's best course of action?
4. Be prepared to discuss a comprehensive plan of action for Juan.