

Keynote address to the
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From Gregory Junemann

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Good afternoon.

I'd like to thank the leaders of the Society of Federal Labor Employee Relations Professionals for inviting me to address your national symposium. I also thank you for forcing me to learn what S-F-L-E-R-P stands for; as well as what the dictionary definition of a symposium is.

At the outset, I should offer a word of comfort, especially for those of you who know me. I plan to stick to my prepared remarks without ad-libbing. In other words, I won't be saying anything that might be misconstrued as political while you're on government time.

Before beginning, I'd like to acknowledge the presence of former IFPTE Local 1 President Ed Cahoon, who currently serves on SFLERP's national executive board. And I'd like to give a group shout-out to the IFPTE local leaders who are here today.

At the outset of my remarks, I must offer congratulations to SFLERP's entire leadership team for the timing of this symposium.

Unions representing government service employees are under attack across the country; in cities, counties, and state levels, and certainly, in the federal sector. None of us in this room – not labor, not management, and not those in the neutral fields are immune to these attacks.

As we follow today's news, we see piles of proposed legislation aimed at gutting the rights of government workers – rights that have been dearly held provisions of government employment for more than a half a century.

As I considered what I might say to this symposium, I dug into the history of this organization. What I learned was that SFLERP was founded in 1973 – right about the time that the Civil Service Reform Act was being debated in the Halls of Congress and in the op-ed pages of major newspapers across the nation.

Certainly, the timing of the creation of SFLERP and the adoption of major labor legislation was no coincidence. The founders of SFLERP must have recognized that federal government employees were soon going to gain significant footing in broadening their rights as union members. Acting strategically, the founders of SFLERP pre-empted the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act by creating an organization whose mission was – and is - to enhance the value of federal employee labor/management relations.

So, why was it felt that enhancing the value of the labor/management relationship was necessary?

Surely, it wasn't to avoid strikes or lockouts. Such actions might have been commonplace in other employment arenas, but they were and are strictly forbidden within the federal government. Back in the 70's, the notion of curtailing federal workplace disruption wasn't even considered. In fact, quite the opposite was true. In the end, Congress passed and the President signed into law, a bill that declares that the rights of federal government employees to unionize as necessary to serve the national interest.

Let me repeat that - unions were not considered disruptive; rather, their lawful existence in the federal government was deemed to be in the national interest.

As the language of the Civil Service Act was being crafted, SFLEPP was founded to promote collaboration between practitioners in all fields of federal government labor/management relations.

SFLEPP was founded because it was understood that by developing a collaborative relationship with a unionized workforce, management with assistance from neutral professionals can realize productivity and efficiency improvements that would otherwise be unachievable.

Societal opinions have certainly changed since 1973, but the truth is always the truth.

Today, just as in 1973, a unionized workforce is a more productive and cost efficient workforce.

And today, just as in 1973, having our federal government workforce represented by unions of the employees' own choosing serves our nation's best interests.

Committed federal workers – whether they're engineers or mechanics, scientists or secretaries – have the greatest first-hand knowledge of how best to do their jobs. These workers, who have devoted their careers to government service, know better than anyone how to shave time off of processes and procedures – creating substantial time savings that can result in jaw-dropping cost improvements.

You see, Federal government employees are not incidental to America's betterment. No, they are indeed essential to maximizing the best possible use of our nation's tax dollars. As accountants who calculate the cost savings can readily attest; our highly committed government workers will continue to figure out ways to get their assignments done faster and with a higher degree of quality.

But for these same employees to step forward, they must be assured of the legal protections that only a union can bring. Without legal protections, even the most talented of federal government employees will do their jobs to the best of their ability, but will work with their heads down. Regardless of an employee's recognized talents, if she or he feels at risk of criticism or retribution for daring to offer a new idea or to suggest an innovative approach to an established process, the employee will simply remain silent and do her or his jobs.

In such instances, a union offers the legal protection needed to grant the employee a sense of strength. A unionized employee knows that she or he has the freedom to bring forth new ideas and new concepts – and perhaps, to suggest bold approaches to old problems – all in the name of increased efficiency ... and without fear of reprisals.

When I speak of the perceived threat of retaliation, I don't mean to criticize those in the supervisory ranks. But let's face it, even the greenest novice knows as well as the most seasoned veteran that her or his supervisor can be as vulnerable as any rank-and-file employee for rocking the proverbial boat.

So, when a group of federal government workers decides to join together with other employees who share a common interest, and form themselves into a union, that enterprise should be both accepted and embraced.

Because a unionized workforce is where the ideas will come from. That's where the improvements will emanate. That's where the cost savings will start.

And that brings me back to the inception of SFLERP – to the imperative necessity of instituting a collaboration among all participants in the labor/management employee relations field – especially among professionals.

You know, one of the major criticisms of President Obama's Executive Order on Partnership is that the Executive Order lacked the teeth of enforcement. Serving as a member of the National Council on Partnership, I played a large part in calling for on-site labor/management forums, on insisting on locally agreed-upon programs, and in requiring the submission of annual reports. And I encouraged local union leaders to file complaints of every flavor and color when these things weren't done.

Yet, the fallacy of this approach is glaring, and it's a major reason so many view President Obama's Executive Order 13522 to have failed.

You see, in any bipartisan endeavor, if one party has the full power and the complete authority to determine whether the parties will act in partnership, the parties will never be equal. In order for a true working partnership to be effective, both sides must willingly recognize and accept the understanding that every person involved shares equally in the successes and the failures of the endeavor.

Having worked in the private sector, I have seen how labor/management partnership programs have been misused to solicit time-saving ideas from employees, who then lost their jobs as a part of the resultant implementation plan.

Contrarily, the federal government has the unique ability to gather time-saving ideas from its workforce, and after implementing those ideas, to shift its workforce priorities without resorting to overly zealous and short-sighted employment reductions.

Because of its ability to capitalize on cost-cutting ideas with a forward-facing approach, the federal government can and must take full advantage of a true labor/management partnership.

I believe without a sliver of a doubt that a full partnership between our federal employees' unions, their counterparts in management, along with the essential assistance from neutral professionals is essential for providing our nation's taxpayers with the most efficient and productive operations possible. But if the partnership has come into being only in response to an order, it's not a real partnership. Again, the parties must come to the partnership willingly and be anxious for its success.

And that's why an organization like SFLEPP is so badly needed – now, perhaps more than ever. SFLEPP came into being because our nation's taxpayers deserve nothing less than our government's most effective operations. As the founders of SFLEPP surely knew, a working collaboration between all parties can be so mutually beneficial, it should be mandated by common sense and not by a signed piece of paper.

It is toward this noble goal that you have gathered here at this symposium – that every employee represented by the people in this room must have the legally protected freedom to do their very best. And in sincere dedication to all those workers, you have graciously accepted the challenge of achieving that goal.

And for that, I thank you.