



How to Make Government Behave

by Richard W. Rahn

SEND A POLITE LETTER DEMANDING TO TALK TO A REAL PERSON

Most people who work in government have no problem giving their real names and telling you what they do, but there are exceptions. Those who are engaged in real undercover work for government intelligence agencies or certain law enforcement agencies have a legitimate need to keep their identities secret, but they are a tiny fraction of all the people who work for government. However, what we are seeing is that too many other people in government, notably at the IRS, use pseudonyms when dealing with the public. The claim is that they need to do this to protect themselves from irate taxpayers. In reality, IRS personnel are no more in danger than many others in both the public and private sectors who have to deliver bad news (including economic columnists). All too often, the main reason for not giving the taxpayer a real name is for IRS officials to avoid taking responsibility and to cover for a lack of knowledge about the case and/or the tax law and regulations.

In many parts of the country, the local property-tax official is very public and even sends the tax bills with his or her name on it. Property taxes are painful for many people, and assessments are always somewhat subjective; yet, it is rare for these tax officials to be maltreated. When a policeman stops a motorist for an alleged traffic violation, the motorist is often unhappy, but the policeman almost always gives his name, in part to defuse the situation by making it a discussion between real people rather than a nameless state functionary.

During the congressional hearings into the most recent IRS scandals, the acting commissioner repeatedly admitted that the IRS had given "terrible customer service." (Note: In IRS-speak, the coerced taxpayer is a "customer.") If the IRS employees really want to improve "customer service," they could begin by regarding taxpayers as fellow citizens who want to be treated as something more than a number by those whose salary they pay.

As one example, the IRS sends out millions of "deficiency notices" each year to taxpayers who may or may not have made a mistake on their returns. The IRS notice starts out with "Dear Taxpayer" rather than using the taxpayer's name in proper form. The letter is signed by the regional director of compliance rather than the person who actually wrote the letter and calculated the alleged deficiency. The contact person is given as the office of someone's last name that differs from the person who signed the letter. The contact number is most often busy; and if the taxpayer, by chance, reaches the number, it is usually answered by someone different from the stated contact person. Most often, the person reached has little knowledge of the specific case or even the issues raised. Such unnecessary treatment is the reason many taxpayers become irate, and not because of a payment they might have to make owing to an innocent mistake or misunderstanding.

It gets worse. The National Labor Relations Board has made it illegal for an employer to require his or her workers to be "... courteous, polite, and friendly to our customers, vendors and suppliers, as well as to their fellow employees."

Congress is working on new legislation requiring employers to "E-Verify" the legal status of employees. Like any other government program, it will be rife with database and bureaucratic errors that will deny many citizens their fundamental right to work and earn a living. At least the Senate bill includes a small business and employment advocate to help mitigate the problem. This provision should be made part of the House bill. And those improperly denied verification should be given the right to sue the government.

Advocates of bigger government, who claim it is necessary to protect us, should be the strongest proponents of measures to make government treat citizens in a more civil and respectful way. Yet, many, by allying themselves with government employee and other union groups, undermine their stated goal of increasing respect for government.

If the administration and Congress refuse to insist that government agencies and their employees be more civil, perhaps we citizens should send very polite letters back to those in government saying we would be pleased to comply with their request once we know the actual person making the request, the lawful reason for it, together with a specific phone number so we can discuss the issue with that person, if necessary. The way to stop government abuse is by refusing to submit to it.

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