

ONE-ON-ONE

Bill Johnson | Secretary of Commerce, State of Florida and CEO, Enterprise Florida

Bill Johnson is Florida's secretary of commerce and president and CEO of Enterprise Florida. Appointed in March 2015, these positions mark the apex of Johnson's 35-year career in public service. Previously, he held numerous executive positions with Miami Dade County, including director of PortMiami and an assistant county manager responsible for some of the nation's largest infrastructure projects, including those at the port and Miami International Airport.

What inspired you to enter public service?

I applied for several internships as I was completing my master's degree program, which I was fortunate to have the federal government pay. Having the choice of two programs, I selected Miami-Dade. During my first year as a management intern, I accompanied County Manager Merrett Stierheim to a meeting of an organization, Leadership Miami. I was so inspired; his was one of the most memorable speeches I ever heard. It gave me pause to ask, "Do I want to go to law school? Or, would I like to continue my career in public service?"

During a lunch with Mr. Stierheim shortly afterward, the interns talked about our experiences. It made me again reflect on what I had learned and the experiences I had. I made the decision to remain in public service and the county made me an offer to stay permanently. That was 35 years ago and I never looked back.

What advice do you have for young professionals in their first five years of working in the public sector?

My career has been one of great fortune and incredible opportunities. Part has been luck, and part has been the skill to see and think through what an opportunity represented and could lead to. My mentor, Mr. Stierheim, tutored literally hundreds of us. Working in a mid-management staff role on capital development and improvements was a chance to learn and grow. The number one thing I tell young people is to not be afraid of a challenge.

I spent the first 12 years of my career behind the scenes doing what some might consider grunt work. But, this allowed me to network, meet lots of people and become involved with meaningful projects. I worked with civic organizations and got engaged in my community. I had front-line, firsthand experience. This helped me develop confidence and the ability to lead in the next, more challenging assignment.

Do not be afraid to take a risk. If something does not work out, get up, dust yourself off and move forward. Do not wait to be asked. Volunteer for an assignment. Take on scary and risky things. I did not become Florida's secretary of commerce overnight; I had a 35-year history. The governor came to me. Why? He saw me in action. People want to see people in action.



You led some of Miami's largest and most politically complex organizations. And, your tenure was marked by your ability to build coalitions. What lessons do you have for other public managers leading public-private partnerships?

In public service, you get a good sense of budget problems and management issues. I always have kept an open mind when stepping into an agency that may be underperforming. Those present opportunities to grow professionally and set a mark.

Along the way, I understood and appreciated what helps drive the American economy: business. If you can blend the best of public service with the creativity and ingenuity of private industry, you are more likely to be successful. A significant portion of my career was looking at how to do it collaboratively. I look for opportunities to align with people.

My career has been based on being professional, with integrity and passion. I believe in what we are doing and what we are about. It is critical to make sure there is one clear vision. Clarity of vision and communication of it lead to success. A leader must be confident. I own up, take responsibility and accept failures. We learn from our mistakes and move forward.

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In addition to your position as secretary of commerce, you are CEO of Enterprise Florida. Describe the enterprise's mission and how this role compares with the traditional policy role of commerce secretary.

As secretary, you meet with civic, political and business leaders. My job now is to fashion partnerships. I am the top salesman for the state, working with the governor, Florida legislature and friends at the local level—cities, counties, economic development agencies and chambers—to drive the third most populated state. My job is to create at least one million new jobs in the next four years. The only way to do it is by having a clear vision and working in partnership. Make sure people are properly aligned and that you communicate effectively with all stakeholders.

You have held management and leadership positions at a variety of organizations, reporting to both elected and appointed officials. What is your advice to other public managers on navigating this relationship?

Do not distinguish. Treat everyone the same. I mean this sincerely. Whether you are the president of the United States or governor of Florida, I have one standard: respect. Lead by example. What public officials like—whether they are county managers, administrators, mayors or private sector board members—is that I am genuine. I do not overcommit and try not to overpromise. They know that I am a balanced, fair individual.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment during your time in public service?

What has made me happiest are the people I have had the good fortune to work with. I was just on the phone with my successor at PortMiami, whom I helped train for 27 years. We took an underperforming port and brought it to its highest level in its 100-year history. I am having lunch with my successor at the County's Water and Sewer Department; I hired him out of graduate school 23 years ago. I look back and say, "We did this." The opportunity to make a difference by working as one: That is what it is really about.