

International Network of Asian Public Administrators (I-NAPA) Leader Spotlight – Rey Arellano

1. (General Background) What or who inspired you to pursue a career in local government?

It was my neighbor, Bob, who I met early in my Navy career. He was also in the Navy at the time, assigned to a different organization. Fast forward 24 years later: I had retired from the Navy and was working in the private sector as an IT Program Manager with an eye toward becoming an IT Director or Chief Information Officer (CIO). Bob had also since retired from the Navy and was working for the City of Norfolk VA. When he found out I was looking for the next opportunity, he encouraged me to apply for the vacant IT Director position in Norfolk. Although I didn't make it to the interview phase, I was intrigued with the prospect of continuing public service to the local government level. A year and a half later, I applied for, and was subsequently appointed as Deputy City Manager and CIO for the City of San Diego.

2. (Being Asian) Has being of Asian heritage helped develop or influence your leadership perspective or style?

It must have, but I'm not sure I can identify what specific aspect has had what influence in the development of me as a leader. What I can say is that early in my career, I worked hard at the tasks in front of me, was deferential and somewhat (very?) introverted. It was a gradual, deliberate effort to get comfortable with increasingly visible leadership positions, particularly in public speaking situations. And I preferred a collaborative, inclusive approach at work, even while I was in the military.

3. (Important event / Challenge) What has been the most significant experience and or challenge in your career that changed you professionally?

During my Navy career, I served as a Strategic Policy Analyst at a Navy think tank. During that time, I interacted with admirals and generals while conducting research on naval military policy. This changed me in two ways: (1) it significantly broadened the way I thought about things, from focusing on the procedural, technical operation of a nuclear powered submarine, to thinking about global, subjective implications of different policy choices; and (2) it provided me the opportunity to interact with individuals several levels in rank more senior to me. During briefings and interviews, I achieved an ability and comfort level to engage these executives in debate in a way I would never have achieved without this experience.

4. (Tips/Inspiration) Do you have any tips for aspiring Asians in local government?

Regarding routine work:

- Always bring your best professional business recommendation first, *then* consider the political overlay; be prepared with options to your primary recommendation.
- Find opportunities to participate in projects/initiatives that span the entire organization as a means of getting to know other departments as well as raising your professional profile with other managers/executives.
- Find ways to practice your ability to speak to groups, with the goal of becoming (relatively?) comfortable responding to hard questions. Some of you may already have experience making presentations to stakeholder groups on controversial topics. I didn't have that exposure because I started as an executive focused internally on the local government organization. So, during quarterly meetings with IT professionals throughout the organization, I created an agenda item called "Ask the CIO" where they could ask questions beyond IT-related matters to what was going on in the city organization. Getting media training can also be very beneficial.

Regarding job opportunities: Aim high (a nod to my Air Force colleagues); prepare thoroughly; and set your expectations modestly. You'll be surprised when success happens.

5. (I-NAPA related) What would you say to encourage somebody to join I-NAPA?

It's a great opportunity to meet people interested in helping each other; to tap into the insights of those who have walked the road ahead; and to contribute broadly to the making a difference in our communities.

6. (Fun) What do you like to do for fun? OR What is your favorite book or author?

On a routine basis, I try to get out on the weekends and ride my bike around 30 miles or so (weather permitting!). I also like to travel and look forward to skiing during the winter season every year.