

## Stier's vision of good government

Leader of Partnership for Public Service is at the forefront of many reform efforts

BY RICHARD W. WALKER

**S**tir things up. Try something new. That's part of Max Stier's philosophy of good government. Stier's interest in making government work better led to his involvement in founding the Partnership for Public Service (PPS), which supports projects designed to attract the best and brightest to careers in government.

As a young lawyer in the early 1990s, Stier worked at the Justice Department as special litigation counsel for Anne Bingaman, then assistant attorney general. There Stier

had an experience that shaped his perspective on government and set the stage for his career in the nonprofit sector.

At Bingaman's request, Stier led an initiative to create a new paralegal program by borrowing a model from the private sector. "The traditional model was to use people who were professional paralegals and had spent their entire careers in the federal government," Stier said. "Not infrequently, they were people who had started out as secretaries and had been promoted to paralegals. Our model turned it on its head and looked to what law firms were

doing, which was to hire people straight out of college who were very bright and very motivated."

At first, managers resisted the program, but they embraced it when the number of paralegals tripled and the program proved to be a success.

The outcome was a revelation for Stier. "It showed me that it is possible to change government and that the system can be changed in fairly straightforward ways that have big impacts," he said. "That was my first experience of seeing that happen."

The paralegal initiative also underscored for Stier the importance of effective leadership. "Anne Bingaman had the vision to say, 'We need to change the way we deal with our professional workload at the paralegal level,' and she did it," Stier said.

That was one of many lessons Stier learned during a career that spans all three branches of the federal government and includes positions as a congressional staff member, clerk to a Supreme Court justice and agency lawyer. He transferred those lessons to PPS when he established strategic goals for the organization. PPS' mission would be to use innovation, workforce reform and culture change to improve government performance.

"I've had a lot of jobs in the federal government doing different things," Stier said. "In every one of them, I was able to see how government can touch and help people and address key problems and how its organizational effectiveness is central to its ability to make the positive changes that we need."

Stier's understanding of what makes effective organizations is what his colleagues in Washington's good-government community most admire.

"He has great vision," said Rick Hastings, deputy chief human capital officer at the Treasury Department, where PPS and IBM are starting a program to attract baby

boomers from the private sector to government service.

"He's a really bright guy and is totally committed," said Stanley Litow, vice president of corporate citizenship and corporate affairs at IBM.

Litow approached Stier last year about collaborating on a federal hiring project named FedExperience Transitions to Government. "He recognizes that this could be something really, really big," Litow said.

Working with federal agencies and public and private partners, PPS has established a high profile. Its biannual "Best Places to Work in Government" rankings, created with American University's Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation, generates nationwide publicity and creates fierce competition among agencies for the top spots.

PPS began in 2001, when Stier met industrialist and philanthropist Samuel Heyman, someone who shared his view of the need for reform in government. Heyman, who had been a lawyer at the Justice Department in the Kennedy administration, wanted to restore prestige to government service and wished to finance a nonprofit effort to help accomplish that.

"He recognized that top talent was not looking at government as an employer of choice," Stier said. "He knew that was a big problem from a business perspective because business is regulated and supported by government. And from government's perspective, he knew that any organization depends on talent."

Stier put together a business plan, and in September 2001, PPS was launched in Washington with a gift of \$45 million from Heyman.

The partnership's founding first principle is that "good government starts with good people." Accordingly, PPS has the duty to lead by example, Stier said.

"We try to focus on hiring the right talent and treating that talent right," he said. "At the end of the day, that's what makes an organization successful. The most important thing I do is hire good people, and then the good people do good work." ■



### The Max Stier file

**Position:** President and chief executive officer of the Partnership for Public Service.

**Background and career**

**highlights:** Stier grew up in Iowa, worked on Capitol Hill as a high school student and in political campaigns during college and law school. In the 1990s, he was a clerk for Chief Justice James Oakes of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit and

for Justice David Souter of the U.S. Supreme Court. He was special litigation counsel to an assistant attorney general at the Justice Department.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in the humanities from Yale University and a law degree from Stanford University.

**Family:** Married to Florence Pan and has two sons.

**Outside interests:** Spending time with his family, running and reading.

**Favorite book:** "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63" by Taylor Branch.

**Management tip:** "Communications, communications, communications."