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Your Start-Up Life: Take It All in Stride - the Good, the Bad, & the Ugly

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Thursdays at the Huffington Post, Rana Florida, CEO of The Creative Class Group, will answer readers' questions about how they can optimize their lives. She will also feature conversations with successful entrepreneurs and thought leaders about how they manage their businesses, relationships, careers, and more. Send your questions about work, life, or relationships to rana@creativeclass.com.

It has been a little more than a year since Richard M. Daley handed over the keys to City Hall to former Chicago congressman and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and returned to private life. Daley had been in office 22 years, a year longer than his father, Richard J. Daley, which makes the younger Daley the longest-serving mayor in Chicago's history.

Part of the reason he was able to have such a huge impact on Chicago was because he was in office for so long. But even more important was the passion and excitement he brought to his work -- something I experienced for myself during a recent dinner with him.

Instituting historic reforms, he helped transform Chicago from a place that had been beset by scandal and racial divisiveness to one of America's best-run cities. He promoted mass transit and bikes and ignited the cultural scene with public art and green initiatives, paving the way for other cities to follow. His focus on aesthetics and quality of life permanently transformed the physical face of the city.

Millennium Park -- a once abandoned railroad yard, now a green space alive with art, music and people -- is perhaps his greatest public works achievement. He was also the moving force behind a raft of simpler but no less effective beautification efforts -- for example, the foliage-filled planters that can be seen throughout the city. The Chicago River walk is lined with cafes and offers boat tours; the bustling Navy Pier is packed with cultural programming and events; and the public art displays throughout the city are must-sees for locals and tourists alike, driving up revenues to reinvest in communities.

He was able to make things happen, harnessing the power of private interest groups -- from the business community and unions, to African American church congregations -- as he needed them. He brought the public schools and public housing under the control of the mayor's office, vastly improving both. He created a state-of-the-art 911 Emergency Center that has become a model for big cities worldwide and Chicago's popular 311 information line (which inspired New York City's). He used cutting-edge,

environmentally friendly building techniques to erect and modernize police and fire facilities as well as schools and community centers across the city. In his fifth and final term, he endorsed same-sex marriage.

Mayor Daley talks about the importance of building trust, maintaining relationships, and inspiring teams; all with an eye on moving the core agenda forward. Though he faced more than his share of challenges in his 22 years at the helm of the third largest city in America, as he says, he took it all in stride: the good, the bad, and the ugly.



Photo credit: Antonio Dickey 2012

Q. What did you like the best about your job and what did you like the least?

A. By far, the best part of my experience as mayor of the City of Chicago was meeting other Chicagoans, people whose voices are not often heard or who don't believe that their opinions matter. That's why I devoted my Saturdays to visiting different neighborhoods. Whether I was there for a block club meeting or a community policing march, I always tried to make sure I had time not just to meet them and shake their hands but to spend a little time with them and hear their thoughts on the issues.

Frankly, some of the best ideas I had as mayor grew out of those kinds of discussions. What I found was that people are very honest, very direct in telling you what ails their communities, and they often have

thought about the issues and have good ideas about how to tackle them. Too often people in government don't realize the value of talking directly to the people they serve. They may not always agree with you, but what I have found is that once people understand that you sincerely want to know what they think, they tell you in no uncertain terms, and their advice is often very helpful. Being mayor allowed me to have an immediate impact for the better on the lives of Chicago residents every day.

There was no worst part of the job for me. I knew when I became mayor that I would have to accept all aspects of the work: the good, the bad and the ugly. That all goes with the territory.

Q. Describe your leadership style? How did it come about? Through reading management books, on the job training, courses, instinct?

A. A big part of my leadership style as mayor was to surround myself with good people and rely on their judgment, but also to use my instincts when appropriate rather than rely solely on polls and consultants. I can't recall many instances when I was mayor where an issue was so crucial that my staff had to awaken me in the middle of the night. I hired very competent managers who knew I expected them to work hard. They knew they couldn't be afraid to make a decision. Sometimes the decisions were right, and sometimes there should have been a different approach. The important thing is that the decision was made. Leaders are expected to make tough decisions. Not everyone will agree with you, but indecision is the worst decision. My staff knew that was my belief.

In my new role of Counsel to the Chicago-based international law firm, Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP, I work with many very talented, innovative attorneys, and it is a similarly collaborative effort to maximize productivity and effectiveness.

Q. If you could point to one person who inspired you as a leader, who would that be and why?

A. I would say that it was not just one person but many people who inspired me, namely my mother and father and the rest of my family. My mother was inspirational in that she instilled in all of her children good values and a strong moral compass. My dad was inspirational for obvious reasons; he was a very strong, accomplished leader. My wife, Maggie, was a good sounding board throughout my time as mayor. So were my children and my brothers and sisters, as well as a number of neighborhood leaders and others whose names you wouldn't know. In seeking counsel on how to approach various issues in government, I tried to discuss them with people who could relate to the issues. I had many advisors who never officially worked for the city but who always could be relied on for good counsel.

Q. As the longest-serving Mayor of Chicago, what lessons did you learn by staying in the same job for so long? What advice would you give to those who change jobs every few years?

A. In government, people like continuity only if they are pleased with the direction in which their city is moving. It takes time to earn the trust of your constituents. Also, major change takes time, and continuity

helps you to make big improvements. For 22 years, I woke up every day thinking of ways to improve Chicago. Whether it was through job creation or neighborhood improvements or advances in education, I tried to work with people to establish policies and programs that would benefit them and their families.

Some of the most impactful changes I made as mayor happened because I worked closely with the people whose lives the changes most affected. Our 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness was devised with input from people who had been homeless and who knew firsthand what needed to be done. Our Plan for Transformation, which sought to rebuild the buildings and the lives of people living in public housing, was written with input from people who lived in public housing. It was not an easy process. Many of the residents were extremely cynical because they had been lied to by government for years. They were bitter and difficult initially. I promised to include them every step of the way. With time, they became my strongest allies in the rebuilding process. That could not have happened without the benefit of continuity.

Q. How can government work faster and more nimbly, like startups?

A. Government has to become more flexible, more open to new thinking and collaboration with outside groups. Sometimes the answers to problems can be found inside government, but increasingly you need to look outside. That's one way to become more efficient and make the most of the ever-shrinking revenue for cities.

Q. Do you see more or fewer young people going into government work?

A. I certainly hope more young people are taking an interest in government. I believe they are, because more and more they are seeing how they can make a difference. There is not as much apathy as there was among young people because they have seen how their input can help.

I liked working with young people when I was mayor. Whether it was high school or college students or young business professionals, I often sought their views on things. I wanted to know about their experiences and what they had learned as a result. One of the most useful social programs I developed as mayor, Safe Homes for Chicago, came out of a discussion I had with a brother and sister who attended Orr High School, which is located in a very challenged area on Chicago 's West Side, and where I served as Principle for a Day a number of times.



Photo credit: Jodi Kawada Page

During a lunch break, they told me how difficult it was to be disconnected from their other siblings, who'd been scattered about the city in different foster homes. Out of that discussion came the program that keeps siblings under one roof with trusted adult overseers, usually a church member or another family member. I received many letters of thanks from young people who benefitted from that program.

Q. Did you impose a culture throughout your organization?

A. I have always said that you must have passion for a job if you want to do it extraordinarily well. I tried to make sure that the people I hired had a passion for improving Chicago. As mayor, I always reminded my staff that the citizens were our customers and that customers judge you based on the quality of service you provide. People need to see improvements. You can't just talk about long-range goals, things you're going to do five years or ten years from now--which is not to say that you should not have long-range plans or goals. You should. In the meantime, though, you must also have shorter term goals, projects like street and alley improvements, beautification plans, programs for young people and families that remind people that the city is continually moving forward.

Q. Given the speed of our economy and lives, relationship building seems like a tool of the past. How important is it for politics and business?

A. Relationship-building is important in general, no matter what your profession. You have to have relationships with your customers, who will judge your performance. That certainly is important in my work with Katten, and that always was uppermost in my mind as mayor, which is why I tried to get out to the various communities as much as possible to meet with people and hear their concerns. Even people who did not vote for me were my customers.

Q. When do you know it's time to fire someone? And what's the best way to do it?

A. Sometimes it is difficult to know when you must let someone go; sometimes it's clearer. First, you have to assume that people are trying their best but there comes a point where it is obvious that they have lost their passion for their job or they have run out of ideas or energy. At that point it is unfair to them and to your customers to keep them in their position.

Q. How do you set a vision for the future and tackle the obstacles and hurdles that stand between you and your goals?

A. My mantra as mayor and even today is to stay focused on my agenda and not let anyone or anything take me off course. In any work that you do there will be obstacles and setbacks. But you cannot allow yourself to become so consumed with those issues that you forget about your main goal, which for me as mayor was always the betterment of Chicago.

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