



(insights for results-focused public leaders)

Career reflections from an evidence leader

An interview with Dr. Naomi Goldstein, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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Andrew Feldman (AF): Welcome to the Gov Innovator Podcast, I'm Andy Feldman. To celebrate a milestone for this podcast – our 200th interview – we're joined by one of the most respected people within the evidence and evaluation community, Dr. Naomi Goldstein, to share reflections on her twenty-one-year career at the Administration for Children and Families at HHS. Here's a clip.

Naomi Goldstein (NG): You know, one of the things that makes me chuckle when I look back at my time in OPRE is that I somehow gradually morphed from bright young thing to being an institution. And part of that journey involved gradually being less and less involved in details, more trusting of staff, more oriented toward creating conditions to facilitate their good work.

AF: Dr. Naomi Goldstein is the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning, Research and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families, or ACF, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She'll retire from federal service this week after a twenty-one-year tenure at ACF, including becoming director of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, or OPRE, in 2004, and deputy assistant secretary in 2015. Also, she was awarded the Presidential Rank of Distinguished Executive in 2012. Beyond those important career achievements, it's her kindness, humility, candor, and commitment – and, I would add, all the sense of humor – that's made her such a valued colleague and friend to so many over the years. It's why I'm honored to have her with us on the podcast for the third time and for our 200th episode. Here's a conversation that I taped with her a few days.

Naomi welcome and start us off, if you would, by telling us what's the toughest part of a leadership position like you have? And what's the most rewarding part?

NG: I would say the toughest parts of the job have to do with the constantly changing bureaucratic constraints. So, you would think the federal government would be a pretty stable

place, but the rules or the interpretations of the rules are constantly changing. And sometimes it feels like as a civil servant, I'm being told to accomplish great things, but just don't hold any meetings, hire any staff, award any contracts or collect any information.

I mean, those are four examples of really critical activities that you have to jump through a lot of hoops just to carry out. I was told something once by Olivia Golden, former assistant secretary at ACF. Something she said stuck with me for years and it was that working in government brings a lot of bureaucratic and organizational challenges. And if you want to thrive, you have to see addressing those as an important part of the job, not as an irritating side issue. So, I try to take that to heart. I confess on a bad day I wonder why I have to deal with all these annoyances. And then I try to remind myself that I am fortunate to have a job where the mission is so compelling that I'm willing to fight for it.

AF: I know our listeners will really appreciate that candid answer, Naomi. I want to ask you next about finding the right balance between, on the one hand, being responsive to political leadership, and on the other hand, pushing back when needed in order to protect OPRE's mission. How do you try and get that balance right?

NG: So, I would offer a few thoughts. One is that, as a research and evaluation office, we are somewhat less affected by political changes than program offices that are carrying out policy and programmatic decisions. When job applicants or new employees ask me how to think about working in a job across different administrations and how to reconcile personal views with changing political priorities, one of the things that I offer them is the thought that if you *agree* with the policies, you can believe it's important to evaluate their impacts. And if you *disagree* with the policies, you can believe it's important to evaluate their impact. And our mission stays the same regardless of the political direction of the current administration.

You know, I've observed that different appointees in leadership roles have different styles and priorities – not just the sort of explicit big picture policy differences, but really personal style, the kinds of things they care about, how they want to be involved. And I've tried to be attentive to their particular interests and usually found that we could be responsive and supportive without compromising our mission.

I also found having an explicit evaluation policy was really helpful. I always brief new appointees on the policy which, as you know, includes the five principles of rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics and does touch on the roles of appointees in kind of setting direction, identifying the priority questions for us to examine, but not in determining what the answers are, which are empirical questions that should be addressed by independent actors. So that's been helpful.

There have been occasional difficult or sensitive conversations, but mostly it's a balance that I felt like we could maintain.

AF: On that point, we once talked about how, if you have an agency evaluation policy, and if leadership wants to go against that policy, and for example, subvert a certain set of findings – isn't willing to release a certain study – you may have to threaten to resign or to resign. That never happened, am I right, during your tenure at OPRE that you had to threaten to do that?

NG: No, not even close really. I will say the closest that I came, a couple of years ago, a career colleague in a program office wanted us to sign a memorandum of understanding that would have given the program office essentially a veto over publication of reports. And, you know, I just said I'd resign rather than sign this, sorry. So, you know, it does help to know your bottom line.

AF: Knowing your bottom line and having the courage to stand up for it.

NG: Yes, I agree that courage is important and I would say that I have gained courage over the years. Some of that I think is just personal maturation. Some of it is the further along you get in your career, the less you have on the line, right? Because more of your career is behind you, less of your career is ahead of you, so the idea of having a bottom line – walking out – is less frightening. I will say it's not that I frequently had to think about, "Oh, would I leave over this?" But I also think that the more time passes, the more solid I felt in my reputation, the more willing I was to take risks.

AF: That makes sense. And Naomi, if you had to give a piece of advice or two for someone assuming a leadership role within a government agency, what might that be?

NG: You know, I would go back to the advice that Olivia Golden gave to me, that I mentioned earlier, that in order to thrive in government, you have to see the bureaucratic and organizational challenges as central to the job. You can't see them as irritating side issues. And I think it's important to take the long view. It takes a long time to make change in government. And even if you're an appointee likely to stay only for a short time, I recommend thinking about building things that will outlast your stay.

AF: I want to ask you next about your leadership style. Has it changed over time?

NG: So, you know, one of the things that makes me chuckle when I look back at my time in OPRE is that I somehow gradually morphed from bright young thing to being an institution. And part of that journey involved gradually being less and less involved in details, more trusting of staff, more oriented toward creating conditions to facilitate their good work, rather than thinking that I need to provide detailed instruction or quality control for everything that happens in the office.

I gave up trying to be the smartest person in the room. OPRE staff are amazingly talented and knowledgeable. More and more, I think, a lot of my time is spent with people bringing me ideas and me saying, "That's a really good idea. You should do that."

So when I was a new manager, I actually was a new parent at the same time. And I used to say, you know, it just turns out it just doesn't come naturally to me to tell people what to do. And, it turns out, it doesn't come naturally to them to do what I tell them either. So I have gotten more used to being an authority, being in a leadership role. I also have come to understand both in parenting and in a professional setting, that leadership is mostly *not* about telling people what to do. It's more about drawing people out, asking questions, providing support.

I think that I have also, with experience, gotten greater clarity about how to give guidance. As sort of small hypothetical example is: You can ask somebody to write a memo. They write the memo. And you say, "No, that's not really what I had in mind." Well, you know, that's inefficient and demoralizing. But it can be difficult to identify prospectively what are the key elements – and that's where experience really helps. You know, if you've written or participated in writing thousands of memos, you get a better idea of what you're looking for. So then instead of "just write a memo," it's: Let's draft a memo and here's the main purpose, here are some thoughts about the main points and the interests of the person we're addressing it to. And then that gives the person doing the work a better sense of what needs to be done, what are the sort of core elements or goals, and you're more likely to get a better result the first time through. That's a small example, but the same sort of approach can be applied to bigger efforts as well.

AF: I think that's terrific advice to try and emphasize upfront guidance to the extent one can. I also want to pull on one thread of something that you said and get more of your input on it, which is the importance of humility. And just to tee it up a bit for you: To me, humility is a lack of arrogance, for sure, but it doesn't mean a lack of confidence. It's about a healthy level of confidence and that in life is not always easy to achieve – getting that balance right.

NG: Yeah, that that definitely resonates. And I have a few thoughts. One, I'll pass on something my father once said to me a long time ago. My father was a physicist. He was brilliant. Everybody knew that he was brilliant – that was sort of his identity in the family and in his professional life. But he once said to me: You know, I figured out pretty early on that there would always be somebody smarter. And you just got to accept it.

But there is a sense in which having confidence allows you to be humble, right? Like I know that I have a good reputation. I know, from repeated experience that I go to meetings and say things and people say, "Oh, that was such a good point." And that allows me – I feel that I have less to prove, which makes it easier to appreciate other people's qualities.

AF: I love that. And I know Naomi, you have an anecdote about when you've reached a certain level of healthy confidence in one's career.

NG: Yeah, so I feel like you've reached a milestone in your career when you go to a meeting or have a conversation and you really don't understand what people are saying – and you're pretty confident it's them and not you.

AF: I like that. So, a final question for you, which is when you think back on what you brought to this job that you're proud of, what comes to mind?

NG: Well, I appreciate that question because as I look ahead to my imminent retirement, I've been giving that a lot of thought. I think one important thing that I brought is I arrived in this job with a firm conviction that this is noble work, important work, and really brings together at least three profound traditions. One, the learning that we do and that we sponsor at OPRE is part of the grand scientific enterprise part of humanity's drive to understand ourselves and our world better. And that learning is in the service of the compassionate mission of ACF as human services agency. ACF is tasked with helping vulnerable people move toward well-being and self-sufficiency. ACF services are designed to alleviate suffering and help participants reach their potential. Also, it's part of the large, wonderful democratic experiment that is American government. And all of those things are really inspiring and uplifting and it's been a privilege to be part of them. And I think I have brought to the work that conviction that this matters.

I also look at the opportunity to lead a group of people as a real privilege and a weighty responsibility. I think early in my time as a division director and then an office director, I was sometimes reluctant to use the word "leader." You know, it seems kind of self-aggrandizing. But it's a role, it's a job, and I take it very seriously. I have the opportunity and the responsibility to foster a positive work environment; I want people to have fun, to find their work rewarding. I can't speak to how successful I've been, but I aim to be honest and open – to listen.

I certainly have tried to minimize red tape and to fight for the tools and the resources that we need to do the work. You can't win that battle, but you try to make progress. I have tried to support the staff in taking risks and being honest. And I've tried to defend the integrity and objectivity of our work.

We spend a great deal of our lives at work and I really hope to help make that rewarding for the people within my orbit. And I just have to say, I work with staff across ACF who are kind and committed and mission-driven and they persevere through bureaucratic obstacles, changing political priorities, and with limited resources. The staff that I know best are OPRE staff. And I have said it before, I'll say it again: They're a national treasure. Their skills, their commitment, their compassion, their integrity. Just impress me every day and I'm going to miss them after I leave.

AF: And I know you'll be very missed there as well. Naomi Goldstein from ACF, Naomi, cheers to you on your retirement from public service. We look forward to learning about your next adventures and thank you for helping us by sharing your reflections and insights from your career at ACF.

NG: Thank you, Andy. It's really been a pleasure to have this time to reflect.