

In the autumn of 2000, in Washington DC, five Interior leaders gathered around a table. Before them were dozens of newly-published books about quality-of-life topics. Those five people had come together to craft a series of forums, a way to share the important concepts in the books with government employees who could benefit from them.

Employees would have the opportunity to get outside the office, network with peers in other agencies, gain knowledge and find support around common issues. Specifically conceived for entry- and mid-level workers, this new program was modeled on the successful Department of the Interior Executive Forums, already in place and highly regarded.

The first “Career, Balance and Diversity” Forum, as they came to be called, was held in Washington during February 2001, in partnership with a local independent bookstore, **Politics and Prose.** The Forums have enjoyed enormous success because they provide the keys to unlock hidden talents of employees, in surprising ways that make a difference. By learning to think more creatively, people can achieve greater satisfaction in their lives – both at work and at home.

After hearing rave reviews about the Washington Forums, Denver employees asked if similar opportunities could be developed for Federal workers in the Rocky Mountain area. Managers of several agencies agreed enthusiastically to support a local program titled **“Leadership, Growth, Transitions”** in partnership with the well-known independent bookstore, **Tattered Cover.**

Since that crucial afternoon, over 500 participants from 21 Federal agencies in Washington and Denver have learned practical methods for dealing with everyday problems. Events have featured brilliant thinkers, including **Pulitzer Prize winners, a MacArthur “Genius”, university professors, physicians, poets, humorists and other outstanding speakers.**



Agencies operate more efficiently when the individual talents of their workers are developed. Offering leadership, creative thinking and tools for solving all kinds of human problems, the Forums help fulfill the promise of American government.

Left: Attendees network over coffee at a Denver Forum.



A participant with his copy of Reclaiming Our Children by Peter Breggin, MD.

Some of the featured Washington, DC, and Denver authors and their books:



Featured authors are experts on topics important to agency personnel. The speakers are selected annually by representatives of sponsoring agencies, with the needs of their specific constituencies in mind. This collaborative effort allows the events to be customized so that subjects relate to local situations.

Sponsorships take the form of subscriptions, which completely support the program. Subscribers receive a block of tickets for that year’s events. Tickets can be distributed to those with leadership potential, or can be used to assist employees with work-related or personal problems.

Each subscribing agency assigns an employee to serve on a coordinators’ group that handles details relating to the events – the logistics, evaluation of sessions and selection of authors for the following year.

Highly cost-effective, subscriptions are an investment in human capital, which fosters productivity and retention of dedicated employees.



Right: Upon arrival at the Forum, each employee receives a copy of the featured book.

Creativity: finding new ways to solve problems...



Before the featured author is introduced, participants have an opportunity to network with peers from other agencies.



During the keynote presentation, a best-selling author shares creative ideas, humorous and inspiring stories. Above: **Robert Moses**, winner of the MacArthur "Genius" Award, and author of **Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights**, speaking at a Forum in Washington, DC.



In some cases the author may conduct a short workshop to help the attendees understand the information presented. Designed to stimulate new thinking without becoming tedious, the sessions focus on relevant issues and topics.



Each person attending receives a copy of the featured book. After the presentation, attendees meet the author and have their books signed. Above: author **Thomas Crum** chats with a participant before signing **The Magic of Conflict**.



Employees have an opportunity to meet peers and talk about the ideas presented. These interactions help people find common ground and build a community of support, contributing to cooperative efforts between agencies.



Afterwards, attendees have a chance to evaluate the sessions. This valuable feedback helps organizers prepare future Forum events and keep the programs on target.

Speakers focus on down-to-earth topics such as dealing with conflict, balancing career and family concerns, managing one's work environment, developing leadership talents, dealing with diversity and generation gap issues. Authors explore new methods for tackling everyday work and life problems. Diverse topics range from rapidly-changing technology to personal well-being.



Pulitzer Prize winning authors **Jared Diamond** and **Ron Suskind** share a moment of humor with agency employees in Washington, DC.

Attendance at the Forums is a pleasure.

Participants enjoy comfortable surroundings, light refreshments, a chance to meet nationally recognized writers and speakers, and interact with people from other agencies.

Sessions allow people to laugh and learn new strategies for dealing with problems. They've been shown to boost motivation, productivity and personal satisfaction among those who attend.



...and solving problems

leads to personal satisfaction.



Any employee can find something to consider from a new point of view. The Forums offer opportunities for networking – with experts and colleagues – to help one another find solutions to common dilemmas. In this way, communities are built, human potential developed and job satisfaction increased.

Other Developments:



When Mrs. Lynne Cheney accepted our invitation for a June 2002 event for children held in Washington DC, a new audience was reached – our partner school children and children of employees.

Over 500 children, parents and employees attended.

The Forums demonstrate the power of cooperative ventures with partners committed to a common goal.

We are proud to have had Pulitzer Prize winners, Harvard University faculty members, local physicians, business leaders and the Vice President's wife, Mrs. Lynne Cheney, as featured authors.

And the story continues:

During the Bicentennial Commemoration, children from partner schools will gather to remember the story of Lewis and Clark. The great journey will come alive through an author presentation and hands-on activities.

Four exciting events will link Art, Collaboration and Conservation. Community murals, landscape photographs, decorative boxes, and public sculptures will demonstrate and promote conversation, cooperation and creative problem solving.

Below: Mrs. Cheney recognizes and rewards the efforts of young readers.



Below: A helpful volunteer displays each page for the audience during Mrs. Cheney's entertaining presentation.



Above: A young member of the audience follows along in her book.



The first Forum, held February 14, 2001, featured Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, **Ron Suskind**, author of **A Hope in the Unseen**.

He described a young man's journey from a tough inner city high school to Brown University.

Cedric Jennings, the book's subject, and his mother Barbara, a Department of Agriculture employee, were in attendance and made the session come alive by discussing their challenges and successes.

Shown at left: Cedric shares a humorous moment with agency workers at the first Forum.



Above and at left: participants discuss concepts and network with others at Forums.



Charter Agencies:

Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs

Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Service

Bureau of Land Management

Bureau of Reclamation

Department of Energy

Department of Justice

Department of Labor

Department of the Interior

Environmental Protection Agency

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Minerals Management Service

National Business Center

National Park Service

Office of Personnel Management

Office of Surface Mining

USDA Food and Nutrition Service

US Fish and Wildlife Service

US Forest Service

US Geological Survey

Veterans Affairs

Veterans Healthcare System



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Comments from Forum participants:

“ ...very inspiring – exactly the sort of nourishment for which we were famished! ”



“ I found the Executive Forums these past couple of years to be very stimulating, rewarding and challenging. They offered me a chance to touch some timely governmental and societal issues that I would not have had time or opportunity to pursue otherwise. ”



“ Later the same afternoon, I was able to resolve a conflict at my office using an idea presented by the speaker. ”



“ Driving back from the Forum, I had my very first experience of not reacting emotionally to stressful traffic. ”



“ The Forums and its big thinkers inoculate me against giving any room to the petty and mundane. I invariably return to my desk feeling renewed and energized – to do my best every day – at work and at home. ”



“ It’s good to hear new ideas – an opportunity not often given to government employees. ”



Department of the Interior University
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