

ONE-ON-ONE

Michael Massiah



Michael Massiah is Chief, Capital Planning, Execution & Asset Management at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, where he oversees a number of functions including capital projects—planning and executing a \$26 billion 10-year capital plan; project management; World Trade Center redevelopment, planning and regional development; and environmental policy and energy programs. The Port Authority operates the busiest and most important transportation links in the region, including John F. Kennedy International, Newark Liberty International, LaGuardia and Teterboro airports; the George Washington Bridge; Lincoln and Holland tunnels; and PATH rapid-transit system.

Over a decades-long career at the Port Authority, where he began as a management trainee, Massiah served in key executive positions, including director of management and budget, director of the Office of Organizational Effectiveness and Change Management, director and deputy director of the Human Resources Department and director of the Office of Business and Job Opportunity. A National Academy of Public Administration fellow, he received his master's degree in public administration from the State University of New York at Albany and a bachelor's degree from LeMoyne College.

Talk a little bit about your career trajectory and how you got to where you are today. What do you think is next?

The trajectory has been an incredible public service journey. My focus on public service started early. I always wanted to make a difference and thought I could do it through education as a teacher and then superintendent of schools, if possible. I earned my teaching degree and learned about public administration, specifically graduate school opportunities that would give me management skills for a superintendent position.

When I found out about public administration and governance, I was incredibly interested in how—through managing government resources and implementing policy—one could make a difference in the quality of life of others. An internship at the Albany Public Housing Authority complemented a course I was taking that spoke to public engagement: It is always about the people we serve and ensuring that we implement policy in which citizens have a say and the opportunity to participate, either directly or indirectly.

I arrived at the Port Authority because of its efforts with job generation. I became involved with a management training program and received a comprehensive look at the activities the agency undertook. The things that helped me were my passion for public service; curiosity about the industries with which we were—and still are—involved; and learning at an early stage that relationships matter and everyone deserves respect. All of those ingredients put me on my path.

I am a public administration traditionalist. Planning, reporting, budgeting, organizing—these skills are fundamental. I played a role in a variety of functions as I had flexibility to go into areas where I did not have a particular expertise but could figure things out. My career has been completely unplanned. Where do I go next? I am at the point where I can focus more time on the development of others. I cannot see myself ever retiring from public service.

How do you ensure the “public” in public service when it comes to large infrastructure projects, especially those involving contractors?

I start with my agency's commitment to being good stewards of public resources, which places the public benefit at the center of our mindset for capital initiatives. In fact, this overarching principle was recently emphasized in a special panel report stating that the Port Authority must recommit itself to ensuring our transit facilities are worthy of the people and businesses they serve.

For it to endure, government must be for, of and by the people it serves. Armed with these principles and supported by regulatory requirements like Title VI and local planning protocols, we have built this guidance into our capital planning and delivery processes. We are part of the body politic—involved in the range of public investments focused on improving the quality of life—through transportation that facilitates commerce and people movement. The point is that it is centered around the stewardship of public resources for public purpose.

I also start by sharing ASPA's Code of Ethics with my staff, who are responsible for executing and planning initiatives that involve capital or policies that affect capital. We always try to focus on people and the public first in our processes.

What soft skills does today's workforce need? What about the workforce of the future?

First and foremost, the public sector workforce must be empathetic of the public it serves. I am concerned about reducing people to tweets and the limitations of engagements through smart phones. To construct and implement policy, we must be vigilant in insisting that our workers fully understand the public's needs and the impact of their actions on the public. This requires a holistic appreciation for our customers and the diversity among them. This makes cultural awareness a critical competency.

Another is the ability to see the big picture and align and shape agency activities to address and meet needs resulting from that view. Then, there is self-awareness, rooted in feedback from wise, honest colleagues, mentors and friends. Also, passion and knowledge about your industry—trends, players, the future. ASPA and other professional organizations provide opportunities to meet wise people who can provide you with observations to inform self-awareness and industry knowledge.

Essential elements in managing large projects include fearlessness, ethics, sticking to the optimum line—that is, setting a point where there is no compromise—in addition to self confidence and maintaining a balanced life.

Who have been your role models/mentors and why?

Sy Murray, because of his practitioner experience and honesty. He appointed me to an ASPA program and then I could not meet the standard. He had no issue saying, "Thanks, but you can't stay on the group if you can't make the meetings." That is real life; he gave me hard, direct feedback. Do not commit to something you cannot complete. I value that.

Audrey Matthews is my ASPA "mom." She has been encouraging and gave me the support I needed when I headed toward new ventures. She shared stories about how she dealt with the impossible. To this day, she is someone I could call and get some words of wisdom.

Mary Hamilton offered me opportunities to get involved in ASPA in meaningful ways, too. She always has been a cheerleader and someone I watched manage various constituents, special groups, egos, VIPs. At the end of the day, she maintained her focus on the mission and objectives of the organization.

What has been ASPA's role over the course of your career? What member benefits have you valued the most?

ASPA has been instrumental. In 1979, SUNY Albany's MPA program provided us a free membership and encouragement to be active. As a HUD Fellow at SUNY, we were afforded the opportunity to attend the Northeast regional ASPA conference in New York City. There, I met a Port Authority management trainee who informed me about the program. I was excited about the possibility of becoming a trainee and subsequently studied the Port Authority in a few of my MPA courses. I was successful in landing the appointment. The contact I made through ASPA was indeed the impetus for my career here and assisted me in sustaining a rewarding, career-long involvement in public service.

SMARTCOLUMBUS

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What does "sustainable mobility" mean for Columbus?

As we planned SmartColumbus, we wanted to be sure that it was not just a four-year grant program that ended after that period. We wanted solutions that can work well beyond the terms of the program and in a range of other locations. It is sustainable in terms of the shift in thinking about transportation and the use of environmentally friendly approaches. Contributing to that change in culture are automatic vehicles and more efficient technology that encourages the use of more environmentally friendly transportation. Ultimately, our goal is that our accomplishments live beyond SmartColumbus itself, become a philosophy and eventually apply to other services.