

If You're not Managing Your Department, Then Who Is?

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Public works is a vast arena of activities within any public organization and, although most county governments do not have to manage all of the varied activities, the need to properly manage those assigned is paramount.

Today, I wish to bring to your attention several components of public works management that are fundamental to being a successful leader/manager. They are not all inclusive, but they are the basis for all managing. The five fundamental functions of any manager are Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing and Controlling.

Every manager should **get things done through other people**. When the manager ceases to accomplish his responsibilities through his staff, he ceases to be a manager. I realize that at many times this is difficult, but the fact remains.

There is a quote from Alice in Wonderland which reads as follows:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” said Alice.

“That depends a good deal on where you want to go to,” said the cat.

“I don't much care where,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn't matter which way you go,” replied the cat.

This quote suggests that where you as a city/county employee want to go makes a great deal of difference in terms of what you do.

You cannot plan, organize or manage your time effectively, until you have identified and set your objectives. Consider also that the term **objective** can and should be used interchangeably with the terms **motive** and **expective**. However, before we can consider objectives, motives and expectives, we must have goals.

What is a Goal?

A goal is the long-term end toward which an effort is directed. A goal is an abstract; a desired state. It is an intention that is not necessarily reachable or measurable.

What is an Objective?

Objectives are something toward which an effort is directed. They are a purpose to attain; an aim, end or result that is **usually** short-term, measurable, within your control and dated.

Remember: First you must have goals; then you can set **objectives**.

I am a student of management and readily admit that there are all sorts of engineering managers far more skilled than I. That is obvious, since they are the types who are writing the management books and receiving the royalties. How-

ever, in reading many of these texts and in listening to seminar speeches on leadership and management in business and government, I find a common theme: "The biggest fault with management in the United States today is that there are too many number-crunching professional managers and not enough leader/managers."

A professional manager is supposed to be able to step in and manage any company, or governmental department — just plug him in with his formulas and that's it. Well, that's not it. You can't successfully run a company or department by focusing only on next quarter's sales, this year's earnings or today's public opinion. Leaders, on the other hand, know their businesses firsthand. They emphasize excellence and quality. Instead of just reacting to figures, they lead people. (1)

What then is a **Leader**, and what skills are required to be an effective leader? A leader is one whom others will follow willingly and voluntarily. Louis Lundborg said,

People will follow the person they feel:
Knows where he is going;
Knows how to get there;
Has courage and persistence (will not run away or back down from danger, opposition, or discouragement);
Can be believed;
Can be trusted not to sell out his cause for his personal advantage;
Makes the mission seem important, exciting, and possible to accomplish;
Makes the others' role in the mission seem important; and
Makes the others feel capable of performing their role. (2)

Palmer further states that "Leaders . . . know their businesses firsthand. They emphasize excellence and quality. Instead of just reacting to figures, they lead people."

By knowing their businesses firsthand, I don't believe any leader/manager knows all the intimate details of all operations. For that reason he hires key subordinates to carry out the day to day operations. The key is that all good leaders emphasize **Excellence** and **Quality**.

If any of you have seen the Public Broadcasting System program entitled *In Search of Excellence*, or the more recent sequel *Excellence in the Public Sector*, you should have noticed a recurring theme — one that Chrysler Corporation currently uses — "Satisfy the customer." In the public arena the customer is the citizen, but most, if not all, other parameters remain the same.

One of the companies featured in *In Search of Excellence* is a family owned dairy business in Norwalk, Connecticut. Stew Leonard's dairy business has grown from a one man operation in 1969 to a \$100 million annual operation today - all out of a single store. Stew learned early that in order to remain in business, you must listen to the customer. In fact, he learned so well that he placed a 6,000 pound granite rock at the entrance to his store on which is inscribed:

OUR POLICY

Rule 1: The customer is always right.

Rule 2: If the customer is ever wrong, re-read Rule 1.

This single store is family operation with over 600 employees, many of whom are in their teens. Continuous training of employees is emphasized, and the acronym **STEW** is regularly used in the training. It stands for:

- Satisfy the customer
- Teamwork is what it takes to make it happen
- Excellence relates to attitude and wanting to be the best
- Wow is what makes it fun.

This simple four letter word pervades the entire operation from opening to closing each day. Employees and management are united in knowing that their jobs depend on the customer being satisfied, so he will return again and again.

As city/county employees, we must also listen to our customers (citizen/tax-payers). When we are listening and hearing directly or indirectly, the message is telling us how we are doing. Since the overall image of any organization is based on the images and attitudes expressed by its management, we, the directors, have a major role in ensuring customer satisfaction.

In order to be competent leader/managers, what then are some of our needed skills? Many of us here are engineers, and studies have found that directors of public works spend the greatest portion of their time managing administrative and field operations. Further, they claim that management is the most important aspect of their jobs. A very real implication of these findings is that most engineers are not trained as managers, let alone public managers. Yet, these same officials manage some of the largest portions of city or county budgets. (3) Needed skills include the following elements to help any manager to exercise leadership.

- Technical Skills
- Managerial Skills
- Communication Skills
- Interpersonal Skills
- Entrepreneurial Skills
- Sales Skills.

You may argue that you don't need all these skills to manage and to be a successful leader. Yet, without a mix of all of them, the leader/manager is not operating at his full potential.

Tomorrow's managers will be regularly asked to exhibit worldliness, global perspective, political astuteness and knowledge of regulatory procedures. They will have to serve as spokesman on public matters, have long-range vision to provide direction into the 21st Century and serve as a mentor/role models to future leaders.

Tomorrow's managers will need strong analytic business skills for making decisions. They will have to show strong personal presence — excellent communication skills, compassion for people you work with and for, customer and service oriented and a high energy level. They will also need competitive instincts, a **never say lose** attitude and, lastly, a very supportive family. (4) This is all quite a large order but, nevertheless, one that will be mandatory for future managers.

Also, we as leader/managers will be asked to work smarter to succeed. Working smarter doesn't mean that we have to work harder. Instead, it implies that we are wisely using the tools of planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling — all fundamental elements of management.

As I sit in meetings with engineers and road superintendents, I am regularly amused by seemingly intelligent individuals who bemoan the fact that their commissioners are out of touch with reality. They continue with the story that they can't get money to do this program, or additional staff to accomplish that assignment. Ladies and gentlemen, no one ever said that being a leader/manager was going to be easy. Getting the job done through other people is the fundamental premise of all managers. If you are consistently losing the budget battle and cannot get your programs off the ground, perhaps you need to ask yourself if the problem is with you or with your audience.

The world is changing. Attitudes are changing. The way we do business is changing. The way we as leader/managers operate must also be subject to ongoing change. Rather than being overly critical of those we view as "our enemies," perhaps we need to walk in their shoes and view the problem from their perspective for a moment. We are constantly trying to sell high dollar programs that we know are valid at the same time that our critics are asking for more health care, bigger jails, additional office space, higher teacher salaries more modern classrooms, and the list goes on and on. Our customers' pockets are only so deep, and shoes on the kid's feet and milk on the table are more important to the citizen/taxpayer than a \$10 million bridge across town.

This is where your communication skills as a leader/manager come to light, and where you need to use that worldliness, global perspective and political astuteness to best advantage. We, as technical types, have traditionally left politics to the politicians. As leader/managers over such large budgets, we cannot abdicate our responsibility to others. We need to communicate better than we have ever done before. We have to become an activist — based on sound technical background — of our programs.

I would like at this time to take editorial privilege of the Stew Leonard acronym and coin one for those of us in the public works arena. Perhaps we could call it **STEP**, like Minnesota's **Strive Towards Excellence in Performance**, a program that has international recognition. Or, maybe, **STREET**, for **Satisfy, Teamwork, Reinforcement, Excellence, Encourage, and Think**. As a matter of fact, that's not a bad idea. We deal with roads and streets all the time and, as leader/managers, we need to incorporate each of the elements identified in this acronym.

SATISFY THE CITIZEN

We need to constantly and consciously make efforts to understand our citizens' needs and strive to serve those needs. If the citizen was getting everything he thought he needed and was paying for, he wouldn't be asking for more service. I recall one time in the early seventies when a citizen called late one afternoon to complain that her mailbox had been knocked over by one of our DPW snowplows. I politely explained that we don't wantonly knock down mailboxes, but that at times when the driver is watching other cars, kids in the street, and a myriad of other things - while at the same time looking at a blizzard of snow in his windshield - that the windrow of snow off the plow may indeed hit the mailbox. I further explained that I would have my superintendent get back with her as soon as the storm had subsided and we had the streets cleaned. After several minutes of dialogue, she reluctantly accepted my explanation.

Since it was late in the day, and since I happened to have a hammer in my car, I decided to visit the lady's house and see what I could do. Imagine her surprise when the director of public works, in suit and tie, comes to her door and offers to repair her mailbox (the mailbox had been fastened to the post with two relatively small nails). The point of this story however, is that to the citizen **someone** promptly responded to her concern. Her satisfaction was transmitted to many of her friends and neighbors and our department got an image boost for a simple service.

TEAMWORK IS WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

The "it" in this case is nothing more than the service we in the public sector provide. Teamwork is an often used and sometimes abused word that many times carries a sports event connotation. Indeed, teamwork is required in sports for a winning team. But, teamwork is just as important in public works if we wish to portray to our customers that we know what we are doing, and we are doing it in a cost effective manner. Teamwork, in part, comes as a result of the **attitudes** of all the employees in our organizations. Positive attitudes are reflected in a desire to perform and negative attitudes are reflected in hostility, infighting, backbiting, etc. If I could randomly select four county engineers or public works directors from this group today and somehow give each of them an identical group of people, equipment and tasks, I would venture to predict that within six months each of the groups would have a completely different identity. Those units with managers who are leaders and motivators will show a positive outlook on their responsibilities and more work will result from the same resource input. On the other hand, units with marginal or ineffective managers, or managers who do not have well developed leadership or motivational skills, will show more negative attitudes and less work output. The bottom line in this rationale is that an organization takes on the image of its leader. The team organization with an effective leader will produce much more than the same number of individuals or groups working independently. Synergism is the generally accepted term for the concept that the collective result is far more valuable than the sum of the individual parts.

REINFORCEMENT RELATES TO BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

One definition of reinforcement is "to strengthen with new force." It is crucial to perceive that the only way synergistic communication can be built is through the combined strength of the individuals. Weakness is only the absence of a strength. Strong, effective communication cannot be wrought from absences. Each of us is defined or profiled by our strengths. They and they alone comprise what we are. (5)

Thus, as leader/managers, we must constantly be looking (and in fact, never stop looking) for strengths in ourselves and in our employees. Only then can we perceive, relate and further build on the strengths of those around us. True positive reinforcement must begin and be nourished through the self-confidence of the leader/manager. Real self-confidence can be fully functional only in relationship to other people. Any organization must do all it can to create a work climate in which people are respected for who they are and recognized for their contributions and a job well done. (6)

EXCELLENCE IN TODAY'S BUSINESS WORLD

This brings to mind Tom Peters and Robert Waterman and their best seller and Public Television documentary entitled *In Search of Excellence*. Both authors have done separate sequels: Peters' *Thriving on Chaos*, and Waterman's *The Renewal Factor*. The original premise of *In Search of Excellence* however was to find out who in American business was doing something **right**. What they found was that "Innovative companies are especially adroit at continually responding to change of any sort in their environments." (7) Further, they found that the excellent companies were, above all, brilliant on the basics. Tools didn't substitute for thinking. Intellect didn't overpower wisdom. Analysis didn't impede action. Rather, these companies worked hard to keep things simple in a complex world. They persisted. They insisted on top quality. They fawned on their customers. They listened to their employees and treated them like adults. They allowed their innovative product and service **champions** long tethers. They allowed some chaos in return for quick action and regular experimentation. (8)

Peters and Waterman referred to good managers as leaders, cheerleaders, coaches and nourishers of champions. They related the manager to the "performer in a live show." They insisted that to become and remain an excellent company, you, as managers, must instill values in your employees.

Public works is a problem solving business and, as such, you must listen to the customer. You must develop a frame of mind that says "What can the public works department do for the citizen — **not** what can the citizen do for public works.

Someone once defined excellence as nothing more than a brilliant flash of the intuitively obvious. Too often we, as managers, get wound up in trying to make complex those problems that can be solved by looking at the obvious.

Some of you may be saying that's fine for the private sector, but it won't work with my county commissioners. When you make that statement you should then ask yourself why were you hired for the job you are now doing. I would submit that the reason you were hired was that you were considered a problem solver and one who would manage resources. It is easy to fall into the rut of saying "It can't be done." The real challenge to you, as a manager who wants to be excellent is to find that innovative way to get the job done so you and your staff appear to be excellent.

ENCOURAGE

Your major responsibility as a manager is to get things done through other people. In your role as leader, motivator, mentor and coach, you have the responsibility to encourage all your people to constantly strive to do better. The old phrase, "It's good enough for government work" just doesn't cut it anymore with your constituents. Citizens expect and demand quality, and they will let the media and elected officials know when they perceive anything less. Your job, then, is to constantly praise the worker while at the same time (privately, of course) criticizing mediocre work. Keep in mind that you should strive to reward quality work rather than fast work.

Any sports team is constantly encouraged by its coaches and fans. You, as the top manager in your organization, have the responsibility — no, the obligation — to constantly encourage your staff to strive for the highest quality possible. You should do this by getting them to work smarter rather than harder.

I came to McPherson County in October 1987 and told my staff, my commissioners and my citizens that I was going to get at least ten percent more work accomplished in the following twelve months without any additional staff and without spending any more money. I told them that we would learn to work smarter, not harder. At the end of that year, we indeed did accomplish our goal to the extent that some of the operating divisions were doing twenty percent more. Overall the results were about twelve to thirteen percent. My people were more satisfied with their work than before and they were seeing less dissatisfaction from the general public. I attribute the greatest portion of that satisfaction and the additional work accomplishment to the constant encouragement (the stroke bucket which is regularly used to sprinkle on the employees when they do good work).

THINK AHEAD

As that leader-manager we have been talking about, you have the obligation to be thinking ahead. This is only 1990, but the theme of this session of the 76th Purdue Road School is *Leadership and Management Excellence*. Last year the National Association of County Engineers' meeting in Wichita, Kansas had as their theme, *Getting Through the 1990s, on the Way to Transportation 2020*. Being an excellent leader/manager ladies and gentlemen, means you are going to have to think ahead for five years; for ten years; for twenty years.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently determined that over 50 percent of its civil works — locks, dams, etc. — were over 40 years old and in need of major repair. *The Bottom Line*, a summary of surface transportation investment requirements for 1988-2020, indicates that current funding levels on our existing highway and road system are grossly inadequate considering rates of deterioration and expected traffic growth.

Many of you sitting here today will be retired by the year 2005 — only fifteen years into the future. Have you thought far enough ahead to consider who your replacement might be; who will be groomed to be your engineers, superintendents and foremen; what types of people will be operating expensive equipment? The hard line facts are that over the next twenty years the only major increase in the work force will come in the form of women and minorities. Both of these groups are currently unskilled or under skilled, and our educational system is not prepared to provide necessary training. Your job, then, will include the development of training programs for your employees at a greater level than ever thought of in the past.

In thinking ahead, you must take into account such major public works related items as:

- Solid Wastes
- Pavement Management
- Bridge Management
- Equipment Management
- Hazardous Materials
- Water Quality Standards
- Wastewater Quality Standards
- Staff Training & Development

- Improved Public Relations.

This list could go on and on. The main point though is that you, as the chief leader/manager over one of the largest components of your entire city or county operation, have the responsibility and obligation to not only see that the brush fires are stomped out on a daily basis, but also to think forward for years into the future.

If you cannot subscribe to the concept of:

- Satisfy the Citizen;
- Teamwork is what it takes to make it happen;
- Reinforcement to build your organization based on strengths;
- Excellence to do it right while allowing innovation;
- Encourage by being a mentor, coach, motivator, leader; and
- Think ahead (for five, ten, twenty years into the future),

then maybe you should be asking yourself some questions. Why am I doing what I am doing? What type of a person is my commission going to replace me with? Will the future director be an engineer manager, a non-engineer with a Master of Public Administration degree, or some other non-technical person who is rich in public relations, human relations and communications skills?

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