

Powering Down in INDOT

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I'm going to talk today about Powering Down in the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) and the INDOT reorganization. I would like to begin by talking about Powering Down, but first I need to let you know where I'm coming from with Power Down. It's not something that just came to me when I started in this position. It is something that happened to me a long time ago. It is surprising that two military people spoke before me, and you didn't hear any war stories. Well, I'm going to tell you one. It is a real war story that happened in Vietnam when I was a young Captain.

I was a Corps of Engineers officer in the combat engineers. (If you haven't heard me before, I consider our maintenance engineers to be combat engineers also.) Part of my job was to support the infantry and the army. That was my responsibility. I was the captain, and had about 260 people working for me. We were a mechanized unit, and we drove armored personnel carriers.

One day we had a mission to link up with an infantry unit and then go on an operation. We were travelling down the road in preparation for the link up, when my lead vehicle hit a mine — a land mine. No one was injured, but the mine blew the track off the armored personnel carrier. I had been in the country now for about six months, and had gone through a lot of turmoil with the people in my organization. I had gotten them to trust me. I emphasized many things in training, and we did a lot of battle drills. So, when that vehicle hit that mine, the people in my organization deployed as they should have deployed.

They went into a 360 degree deployment. We always did that because you never knew when you hit a mine whether there might be somebody shooting at you from the side; an ambush. So we deployed. My immediate action was to first find out exactly what had happened and then, as usual in a combat situation, call into my headquarters to let them know what happened. You do that immediately in case you need help later on. So I called in.

It looked like nothing else was going to happen, when all of a sudden, we started taking small arms fire from my right hand side. Again, we had been through battle drills, and my people knew how to react to the situation. They would lay down a base of fire from the organization on the right hand side of that 360 degree arc (at about three o'clock). They would then get another element that would maneuver to come in and hit the enemy from the side. By the way, the army engineers' secondary mission is to fight as infantry, so this was nothing extremely dangerous for the people in the organization. They were trained as infantry also. So, as soon as I started getting the small arms fire, I reported in to headquarters again and told them of my situation. I gave the coordinates where the small arms fire was coming from, and advised them that I might need some artillery fire

brought in to that position. My people were working and moving just like clock-work. I mean, they were doing it. They were well trained. We were starting to move into the operation of flushing the enemy out from the side.

The next thing I heard was the whap, whap, whap, whap, of a helicopter coming over me. It was a Colonel flying up in a helicopter. Now, I have nothing against Colonels — I was one — but this Colonel, at this time, was above me and had a view of what was going on. He called down over the radio, and told me, “Okay, Captain Shoener, this is what you should be doing.” He didn’t actually say that. We had call signs and words and everything else, but that was the essence. He said “This is what I want you to do. I want you to go ahead and maneuver your element around to the right hand side of where the small arms fire is coming from.”

I told him, no, I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to maneuver around to the left hand side because I felt I knew what the situation was better than he did.

He said “No! Move them around to the right hand side.”

I said “I don’t think I want to do that.”

Then, he said “Listen, Captain, you move them around to the right side. Do it.” He said “Either you do it or put someone on the radio to relieve you and I’ll get them to do it.”

I was a young Captain. This guy was a Colonel who knew what the hell was going on and I didn’t. I did what he told me to do and I took casualties because it was not the smart thing to do.

The point of this story is that the Colonel did not Power Down to me. I was the one on the site. I was the person that knew what was going on. I was the person that knew the quality of my people. I was the person that knew my people. I was the person that knew the capabilities of my equipment and my people. He did not. As my boss, he should have been giving me some type of guidance and direction from above and allowing me to make the decision.

I learned a lesson a long time ago. There were people injured in that skirmish. There was no one killed fortunately. I learned back then, by God, that the best people to do the job were the people that were the closest to the situation. The people that know the people working directly for them.

So that’s where I’m coming from with Power Down. What I want to talk about today is a definition of Power Down and some of the basics of Power Down. Those of you that have worked with me, especially out in the districts and the subdistricts, know I am serious about this business of Powering Down.

First, what isn’t Power Down? Well, Power Down does not mean turn off the power. It is very easy to say, “Well, okay, George wants us to Power Down, that’s good. That means I can sit around, put my feet up on the desk, read the newspaper and just let everybody below me do what they are supposed to do.” You can’t do that. You cannot turn off the power completely. You have to be able to give guidance, direction and some goals to your people, so they know what direction you want them to go. Once you do that though, turn them loose. Turn them loose and let them get on with the job.

Power Down does mean push enough Power Downward so that the subordinates can do their jobs. It’s that simple. Power Down really works. Once you give people some authority and responsibility, they go after it. We talked about retention earlier this morning, and let me tell you, the way you retain people is to

give them some responsibility and authority. Let them bloom. Let them grow. Let them do things that they know they can do.

Here's a good, although rather wordy, definition of Powering Down. Powering Down is an ongoing, dynamic process that involves delegating responsibility while aligning priorities, goals and objectives, with the requisite authority, responsibility and resources for their accomplishments. Ongoing and dynamic means that you can't just say I'm going to Power Down and this is the way we're going to do it, and then turn it loose. You need to keep going around and to make sure that your Powering Down is working. You're the one building the climate. You're the one building the environment to make it happen. You're the one who has to keep checking up on it.

When you Power Down, you can't just say go ahead and do it. You must provide the resources, as the definition says — the requisite authority, responsibility and resources for their accomplishments. You can't just tell a person, you now have this responsibility without giving them the resources and the requisite authority to get that job done. This is very, very important. In an ideal Power Down organization you will find the employees are motivated. They are challenged to know their job and to work as team members.

I want to talk about some Power Down basics. One of the things you need to do up front is explain the priorities, goals and objectives. You have to do it early, and you have to do it often. You have to keep going around. You have to keep banging on it. You have to keep telling your subordinates what the organization's goals, missions and objectives are so that they can fully and intelligently support them. They have to understand what you are trying to accomplish.

There is a preacher down in Kentucky. He wanted to buy a chandelier for his church and he prayed that he would be able to get the money to buy that chandelier. He talked to the board that ran the church, and he told them that he really needed the money to get this chandelier. It seemed that he was very close to getting the money he needed for that chandelier, so he held a board meeting and said I need a chandelier and it's going to cost us this amount of money.

One of the Kentuckians working with the board raised his hand and told the Preacher that he had three reasons why he didn't think they needed a chandelier for the church. The Preacher asked him "Why? Why don't we need it?"

The man said, "These are the reasons. Reason number one, it's too expensive to buy a chandelier for the church; number two, there is nobody in the church that knows how to play a chandelier; and number three, I think we need lights more than we need a chandelier."

So, you must get your subordinates to support your goals and your missions intelligently. They have to know what you are talking about. Plus, you need to maintain a healthy climate for Powering Down. Let your people know that they've got the power to make decisions. That climate is so very important. Keep going out and keep harping on it. I spend a lot of time doing this. I spend a lot of time wandering around making sure that we are trying to get that climate in our organization.

Insist on doing the important, basic things correctly. This is very important. You have to get back to the basics. Our job is to fix the darn roads and to make the roads better. If we aren't directing everything we do in this organization toward making that road better, then we aren't back to the basics. If we're working on

something off the wall that seems like it's going to just make our job easier, and it's not focused on the basic motive of fixing the roads in Indiana, then we have a problem. We really do. So you need to insist on doing the basic things correctly.

You need to do some measuring also. When you measure, don't jump to conclusions too quickly. I'm working now with my District Directors on something called the Wellness Report. On this Wellness Report, there are a lot of numbers being reported. In addition to the numbers, though, there is a little traffic signal next to various items. At the moment, there are twenty-six or twenty-seven items on the report, and all of those items has a little traffic signal with it. Each traffic signal gets filled in with either a red, amber or green dot. Then, when the report moves up the chain of command, these will alert the commander to any problems within the organization.

When the district directors send these reports out, they are reporting on the wellness, the health and well being, of the organization. Sure, there's numbers on the report. Those numbers are supporting the type of signal they send forward. This goes all the way down to the units. Our unit foremen are the people who begin the report process. That report then goes up to the subdistrict, and from the subdistrict up to the district. At the district level, all of the staff sections report on their wellness, and that report comes up to me. So, you need to try to get some indicators. Just make sure you have some adequate information before you try and take any action.

Next, spend time training and developing subordinates. I am a big believer in training, and there are probably a lot of people tired of hearing me harping on training. But you can't be doing the basics correctly unless you spend some time training and developing your subordinates. It has to happen. You're here today for training. You're here at the Road School to train.

The training specialists in our organization probably get tired of me badgering them, but we need training and we need to keep doing it. Who is responsible for training? You are. The leaders in any organization are the people responsible for training. We've got great people working for us in our organization that want to do much more than they are doing currently. Many of them can't do more unless we give them the right type of training. We have to be able to do that.

We also have to assume that our subordinates are doing their best, and we have to look for systemic problems as the root causes of failure. I can tell you right now that all employees do not roll out of bed in the morning and say, "Well, let's see, how am I going to mess things up in INDOT today?" They don't do that. They get up in the morning and say "I'd really like to do a good job today."

Their only hope is that we, us managers, have worked to make sure they can do a good job today. If we haven't, then shame on us, because our people do get up in the morning wanting to do a good job. The only thing that can prevent them from doing a good job is us. Again, this is very important. It is part of the whole theme. We have to be the role models if we are going to make Power Down work.

But I'll tell you what. We can not tolerate unethical practices. When I first met with the subdistrict managers, I gave them some pointers on how to make decisions within their organizations. I think most of them still remember this because I keep harping on it. I told them there is a three step process to good decision making. Number one, use common sense in what you do and the decisions you make. Number two, ask yourself, are you looking out for the best

interests of your fellow hoosiers (the motoring public and all of our other customers)? Number three, ask yourself, is this an ethical decision you are making? Is it something that you will not get any personal gain out of?

That is the way I operate. you'll notice there was nothing in that process about checking to make sure if it is in accordance with policy number 7-8, or procedure such-and-such. Those three rules will carry you through almost every decision you have to make.

How does this apply to what we're trying to do at INDOT? When I first came to INDOT, I had a meeting with the district directors. Christine Letts, INDOT commissioner, came and talked to us at that first meeting. She gave us a list of themes that she wanted to stress. These themes all support Powering Down, and they haven't changed from that first meeting. I think they're themes you all need to know. These are where we want to go and where we want to continue to go. Those themes are:

1. Customer focus;
2. Excellence in work;
3. Leadership and modeling (setting the example);
4. Teamwork; and
5. Be proactive when possible but always be ready to react.

REORGANIZATION

When I first started thinking about what I would cover today about the INDOT reorganization, I looked at all of my wiring diagrams and my boxes and charts. I looked at them, and said I really don't want to do that. What I really want to talk to you about is my philosophy about the reorganization, and organizations in general. Because to examine what we're doing is more important than any boxes, charts and diagrams. I believe strongly in concepts about an organization, as opposed to charts and boxes.

I've gone out and talked to people, and they tell me, "Hey, George, on this new reorganization, you've got this box working under this person and these two boxes over here. I don't think I can work that way." I tell these people, well, don't work that way.

Let me tell you about organizational charts. This is probably heresy to personnel people, but my feeling is we have organizational charts because we have to assign some type of job classification to the people within our organization. We have to do that. So we assign a job classification off the personnel chart. Then we take that particular job classification, write a job description and attach that to a personnel code number. That's how a person gets paid. So, we need organizational charts to get people paid. Once you have that chart fixed up, though, you throw it in a drawer, and you go back to the basic task of getting your mission accomplished and doing what you're supposed to be doing. Don't worry about the organizational charts. That sounds terrible. But I'm telling you, you're going to go a lot further toward accomplishing your goals and your mission if you do it that way.

Flexibility Versus Job Description

If someone asks me, "What happens if I try and get this guy to do a job that's not on his job description? We're really going to have problems with that." Listen,

if it's not in his job description and he complains about it, pull the job description out of the desk and look at it. Ask him, "What did I tell you to do today?" Then, write his answer on his job description. Tell him, "Now it's part of your job description. Go do it."

There is a catchall on these job descriptions anyway. Job descriptions usually say you're supposed to do what your boss tells you to do. This is not a big problem, because most of our people are waiting for someone to tell them what to do. They are waiting for some good guidance. They are waiting for direction. So use flexibility. That's my thinking when talking about reorganizations and organizations.

Common Sense Versus Structure

I discussed this earlier. Use common sense. Don't get wrapped up in the structure of your organization. You need to do the smart things. Let's not always be tied down to that organizational chart.

Visibility Versus Aloofness

There's another problem when you have these organizational charts with all these boxes. There is one person with a box at the very top, at least within this organization. He says I'm up here by myself, and that means I better not go down and talk to anybody. Since I'm up here by myself, I should remain aloof and let all those swine down there do the job. Well, that's not the way it's supposed to work. That boss needs to get out, and he needs to work amongst the swine. He needs to get out there and wallow in the mud with the rest of the swine. He needs to get out and do things with them, get out and move around. Don't remain aloof.

Most people, when talking about all these lines and getting out to talk to people, figure that an organizational chart has to be some kind of pyramid. So, they put eight boxes on the bottom, four in the next row, two above that and one up on top. They don't want any of those boxes mixing with each other and they don't want them overlapping. Let me tell you, that's the wrong business. We want all of the boxes thrown together, mixed up, talking to each other and communicating. We want them moving across those horizontal blockages and barriers. You don't want to power up. You don't want to keep the decision-making going up in the organization. You want to get it down at a lower level.

I am going to show you an organizational chart anyway. It's not actually a chart. I call it an organizational map. Tom Peters wrote a book called *Thriving on Chaos*. In the appendix of the book, Peters talks about organizational maps. We're going to look at an organizational map for INDOT.

Now this is a perception of our organization for INDOT. In the very center is what I call the executive staff. We are in the middle. We are the power. I'm not saying this is the way it is. This is just one perception. Below that are one-way functionally narrow communications processes. All the arrows point out from the center. These could be division staff heads, district directors or subdistrict managers. Notice, though, that everything is going out.

Up near the executive staff, there is a central office crew that protects the executive staff. We sit up there in our ivory tower, while this staff protects us. They won't tell us any bad news. Only the good news gets through. Then, there are these black boxes. Here are the narrow, functional, middle managers. They sit

down in their offices, and wait for the lightning bolts to come down from the central office and the executives. They don't do anything until those bolts come down.

Last, we have a barrier. There is, supposedly, a very thick barrier that runs around the whole organization. The entire organization is on the inside of the barrier. Who's on the outside? On the outside of the barrier are our customers — the Federal Highway Administration, public officials, the motoring public, contractors, consultants, vendors and other state agencies. How do they communicate to us? We have little receptacles outside. If they want to communicate with us, they send us a memo through the mail. They drop the memo in one of the little receptacles and, in due time, we will get a reply to them.

This is called the **Inflexible, Rule Determined Organization Where All Persons Know their Place**. That is what we don't want to look like. Let me start again, and show you what we do want to look like. The central office for the executive staff is still in the center circle. Now, though, they are the guidance and control system. They provide the division with a philosophy and a set of core values for the whole organization. They provide those themes that I discussed before.

In this organizational map, we don't have lines and boxes. We have people from central office and executive staff moving among the districts, subdistricts and units to find out what is happening, what is the health of the organization. Top management spends time with the customers. They go out and see the public, telling them what is going on in transportation. They talk with the feds. They talk to the vendors and the contractors.

In this organization, middle managers readily cross functional barriers, managing horizontally without top guidance. We want a division chief talking to directors. We want a division chief talking with other division chiefs. We want district directors talking to district directors, and sub-district managers talking with sub-district managers. We want everybody communicating. We don't want a bunch of lines in there blocking that.

In this map, our front line people communicate directly with each other. They share information amongst subdistricts and units and staff sections within the districts. The front line people talk to management. They are allowed to go up and to talk to people in the executive offices. There is nothing wrong with a subdistrict manager talking to someone in the central office. He doesn't have to go through his district. He should be able to communicate.

The idea is to get the job done. Let's not put all these barriers in the way. Our front line people should communicate directly with the customer, and that's what we have now. Sub-district and district people talk now to our customers — the vendors and contractors. A lot more of that is happening now within our organization.

The idea, also, is to not let the barrier get so thick between the organization and the customer. Thin it out. Allow more communication and conversation to take place. It is not always easy to break down barriers. It is a different attitude. Someone needs to take the first step to cut down and break a barrier. That is what we need to do between us and our customers. We need to make this barrier as transparent as we can. Now, we have customers communicating directly in, as well.

So, that is what we want to look like as an organization. You can't send this chart over to personnel and tell them to assign PCN's. It would be impossible to do, but this is the type of organization we really want to be able to run. We want

to be able to communicate, get out-and-about and do things within our organization.

Under this Power Down philosophy, this new INDOT reorganization, you can see that a lot of things are changing. This brings me to my story about elephant stakes. When an elephant is born at the circus, the little baby elephant begins his training right away. The trainers chain the little baby elephant to a stake and drive that stake into the ground. They take the chain and put a clasp around the little baby elephant's leg to hold it in place. At first the baby elephant tries to get away, and he keeps pulling and pulling on that chain. Eventually, the little elephant's leg begins chafing and hurting. After a while, the pain really bothers it, and the elephant finely gives up. In effect, he says "I'm not going to pull on this chain anymore. It hurts too much."

The elephant grows up and becomes a several ton adult elephant that could pull a stake out of the ground without any problem. But do you know what they use to keep that elephant in place? They use the same stake, driven into the ground, along with a little heavier chain and clasp. They still use the same stake! That elephant could easily tear it out of the ground if he wanted to, but he doesn't. Do you know why he doesn't? Because that elephant is too dumb to recognize that his environment has changed and he needs to do things differently.

That is called elephantine decision-making at its best — when you cannot recognize that things have changed when you have to make a decision. I'm telling you, we are changing. We are going to be a different type of organization. Plus, we are going to be a better organization for it.

