In Praise of State Government Silo Busters

It has become commonplace to disparage public servants who "can't break out of their silos".

But current efforts by Minnesota child welfare managers tell a more positive story.

First, consider that many government jobs break down roughly into thirds:

- 1/3 manipulating your computer into accepting your input so you can move on with your day
- 1/3 making sure every stakeholder has input into every decision
- 1/3 documenting every action so there are no adverse audit findings

The other half of the time staff actually do their work, which shows up in emails and calls from them at 9 PM or on Saturdays.

Details are still unfolding, but we wanted to share now that we have recently experienced above-and-beyond efforts where staffers pushed through bureaucratic constraints, brought constituents together, and got the job done despite, well, their jobs.

Here's to the silo-busters.

Why is breaking down government silos so incredibly hard? Listen to or read our podcast here.

Narrative for podcast based on the blog "In Praise of State Government Silo Busters"

As this blog hints at, it is incredibly difficult to break out of the day-to-day demands of a high-level government position and to do the next level of work that makes all the difference in the final product. In our experience it takes individuals who are incredibly dedicated to their jobs, who work way more than 40 hours a week, who are creative, and have excellent diplomatic skills among other qualities. There are probably way more people who fit this description than the public is generally aware of. So I always cringe when I hear a derogatory comment about public servants.

This is not to say that there aren't many public servants who simply follow the requirements of the job, figuratively speaking to not look up from their desk to see what else they might be doing to get a better result.

It is also important to understand that it is often not very rewarding to try to go the extra mile and make an important goal a reality. You may not get recognized or appreciated or praised for your efforts. Often you even get punished. One thing I learned early in my government career is that if you were the only person to stick your head up out of the crowd you are likely to get shot at. We'll get into the reasons why organizations behave this way in a moment.

I think it's important context to understand how incredibly demanding higher level government jobs can be, and how much of the work that they do is really unrelated to the desired result. There are many reasons for this but the one that perhaps is most important is the constraints

and restrictions that are placed on people in bureaucracies by elected bodies, whether they be city councils, county boards of commissioners, states or the federal government.

Often elected officials pass well intended laws that are far too prescriptive and don't leave bureaucrats much room to implement them creatively. I may have mentioned that I once worked on a project for the US Department of Agriculture and learned that some programs are budgeted by Congress down to the county level. There are over 2000 counties in the United States. So if you are, for example, a manager in a small county in Iowa who wants to transfer and $800 surplus from a food stabilization program to a rent stabilization program, you can't do it. So lots of the things that we pay managers to do, they can't do.

Much of this of course is well intended. A lot of legislation is a reaction to some failure in the system so more levels of control and inspection are layered onto make sure whatever the tragedy was doesn't happen again. But over time this accumulates into a spider's web of regulations and requirements that strangle and suffocate agencies.

Some of this just relates to the age of the particular bureaucracy. I noticed this particularly when I moved gradually from jobs in the East Coast to jobs in the Midwest. The older the state or Commonwealth, the more layers of laws rules and regulations they had time to accumulate. While there is much regulation in St. Paul for example, it is nothing compared to Massachusetts. Then, when I spent some time in Arizona I found that there were virtually no regulations, which created a completely different and also messy set of problems.

So when I was in St. Paul one of the projects I undertook was to cut the number of licenses and permits in half, and we succeeded in doing so. Reducing each from 600 or so to about 300. This is like weeding one's garden. But there is very seldom time or interest on the part of mayors or unions or managers in doing that sort of weeding and government agencies. No one usually asks you to do such a thing and you've already got your hands full.

So, what to do about all of this and get to a system that rewards innovative workers, frees them up to do their job, reach his goals more assuredly and with some level of efficiency?

Often the answer is given in this question is to make government more like business. Well, there are so many ways that government isn't like business, it's not practical to just simply map business techniques onto a government agency.

However with some intelligent adaptation much of what has been learned in management science over the last 50 years can in fact be applied to government agencies. And in fact it has.

There are several bodies of knowledge and management science that I have implemented myself, and have seen implemented often. But I also learned that it is difficult for programs and agencies that use these bodies of knowledge to sustain these efforts over time

As a first introduction to this body of knowledge, I highly recommend that you look up a nine-minute video by W. Edwards Deming, one of the founders of Continuous Quality Improvement, or CQI. In this video Deming demonstrates his famous "Red Bead Experiment". You can find it by simply googling red bead experiment and W. Edwards Deming. In this hilarious and in some ways sad nine-minute video Deming, who by the way is a curmudgeon of the first order, takes a

team of people through a training session on how to separate white beads from red beads in a batch. He tells them that as long as they have enough white beads still have a job, that they are a merit-based system, and as long as they produce 50 white beads a day they will still be employed. Also they must not have more than three red beads in each workload. The workers figure out immediately that this is a random system and that is not possible for them to do what he is asking. Management however doesn't get the picture and eventually has to close down the plant.

As in many similar places workers are frustrated by a system that will not let them do their work and that they are powerless to change, yet they still try hard to make it work. The ultimate lesson of this is that everyone doing their job to the best of their ability doesn't result in a good product. It is necessary to take a broader systemic view of the situation. If that can be done, it's possible to create a learning organization, meaning one which is continuously improving and in a consistent upward spiral.

A closely related and well-known set of management techniques to CQI is called Business Process Redesign, or sometimes called simply reengineering. For many years one of the leading proponents of adapting modern management techniques to government was Minnesota's own Peter Hutchinson helped introduce these principles to government in his consulting work, beginning in the 1990s with a book with David Osborne called Reinventing Government. In it he applies many of the techniques and principles of reengineering that have profoundly reshaped and improved American business processes and in some circumstances American government agencies as well. It is worth doing some Google searches and just getting the feel for how it works but as a starter, there are seven basic principles:

1. **Work should be designed such that it is result-oriented and not process-oriented.** This sounds so obvious, but if you look at much work whether in the public or private sector everyone is simply heads down doing their job and not looking at what the final result is.

2. **Involve those people in the process who face the output.** The historic management practice was to simply tell workers what to do. It turns out, nobody knows the job better than the person doing it. So modern management basically starts with the worker and uses them to identify where the problems are, then has a process to move those up to a problem-solving committee or team. A common example is in the automobile industry, though we want to repeat that these principles apply to all sorts of processes, whether in government, or insurance companies, or almost anything else. Historically if there was a flaw in a production line, let's say a problem with the paint that was being applied to door panels, it would not show up until the very end of the process. Then foreman would look at the doors and say "oh no!". Then they would have 700 doors that have to be taken back through the assembly line. Now if there's a problem the worker alerts the foreman to it right away, sometimes the assembly line is stopped until they fix it, which causes all sorts of problems but just much less difficult ones than keeping the line going because they correct the problem immediately and save the process of repainting hundreds of parts. Of course, this

was heresy in earlier manufacturing times the workers were considered to be drones that didn't understand the process.

3. **Merging data collection and processing units**. The idea here is that when workers have real-time information they should use it right away, not hand it off to some data analyst who comes back at a later point and tells them what to do with it.

4. **Shared databases to interconnect dispersed departments** Much of business process design is about eliminating excess steps in the work process, and trying to identify what the whole process is. Sometimes processes are broken up into more than one step unnecessarily. Every time there is a handoff from one unit to another there's a chance for data get lost or handed off incorrectly, which then requires a process of rework to correct the mistake. To the extent data can be shared among units that work on the same overall process, it can eliminate many of those handoffs.

5. **Bridging the processes which are running on similar lines**. Similarly, reengineering looks for similar processes and tries to combine them to reduce the number of handoffs, opportunities for errors to creep in, and the need for rework.

6. **Decision making should also be a part of the work performed**. This is part of the same idea that changes should be made as soon and the need is obvious rather than going through a whole problem-solving process with independent analysts and managers, then coming back to the process where in the meantime many errors have continued to be made. However this also is part of the overall principal that people who are doing the work should be able to make decisions about it and that this often is a team process that occurs in real time. So for example a couple times a shift at an automobile plant, workers will assemble with a technical analyst and their manager and look at current data on a whiteboard with numbers about any about potential problems that have come up. Then the team discusses it and figures out what the likely fixes and then goes back to implement in real time, on that very shift, not the next day or the next week.

7. **Capture data once and at the source**. A simple government example of this would be the process of collecting information on an application for a public benefit program. Often people going through these processes see a number of workers and in each stop have to give the same information over and over again. Of course when that information gets into the computer systems there are misspellings there are middle initials that are included in some names and not another's, addresses quickly get out of date, children's names or dates of birth are entered differently, some critical piece of information gets left off, etc. The technique here is to identify who "owns" the information and have that individual

be responsible for obtaining it in the first place, and updating it as necessary. This eliminates huge amounts of time and effort to reconcile slightly different demographic information collected by a number of different people along the way, and not incidentally makes life a lot easier for the applicant.

Of course these principles are incredibly difficult to actually implement in government. You need to have a supportive leader, normally going all the way to the top of the organization, who will let people color outside of the lines for a while. And those leaders turn over rather quickly. When I was the Finance Director for St. Paul Minnesota we got a Business Process Redesign program going. We trained 30 teams of trainers who were comprised of one union leader and one manager each. We quickly had over 100 Continuous Quality Improvement projects going. And when the next mayor came into office he quickly dismantled the whole process. This has happened to me several times in my career.

So going back to our original blog, this raises the question of how we can support workers, managers and staff who really want to do a great job but are constrained by the bureaucracy, not supported by leadership, and don't have any of the tools in this body of knowledge available to them. Traditionally excellent work in government, in my in my experience at least, has resulted from extraordinary efforts by talented people who often eventually move on to jobs where their efforts are more appreciated. In the meantime they have kept our country from becoming an inept or corrupt government. They are the real hidden heroes of American democracy.

But in order to get on track long-term, in order to have government agencies more often be learning organizations, elected and appointed leadership of government agencies probably would have to become educated about these bodies of knowledge, broadly aware of the potential value of adapting management science to government, not just in and occasional administration but as a general expectation in the field. Over the last 20 years I have to say honestly that I have seen less interest in this endeavor than more, but I am always hopeful that an inflection point will come.

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