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PUBLIC RECREATION MANAGEMENT, REASONS AND RESTRAINTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

It seems that most everyone these days is interested in, and demanding better and more effective management from the public sector. After serious deceptions at the highest level of government in the early 1970's citizens are somewhat more demanding in the accountability of government institutions, and individuals, on all levels. Enthusiasm and interest in good public management is one thing, however, understanding the nature of it, to say nothing of achieving it, is another.

Management concepts in the public sector, including specific strategies applicable to Public Parks and Recreation, differ quite dramatically from management in private business and industry. These sometimes subtle variations in administrative technique, restrictions and restraints on effective management, spell the difference between good public response and poor public perception and response in many human service areas. This article discusses public vs. private management with strategic applications to public recreation.

PUBLIC RECREATION MANAGEMENT, REASONS AND RESTRAINTS

Legislators, educators, economists, business executives, lawyers-- practically everyone, it seems, is calling for better, more effective public management. This real concern signals a strong opposition to passive consumerism in the 1980's advocating instead the keen interest the American public has developed in public policy. Citizen's today seem wiser, and are definitively more sophisticated in their demands for responsiveness and accountability from government institutions on all levels.

This concern for better public management is analogous to the public's desire for an automobile that is safe, efficient and economical. Technology seems to suggest that such an auto is feasible; it certainly makes a good deal of sense and shows a logical concern for the balance of precious, yet dwindling natural resources. Effective management can be viewed in much the same light. Given our present political system it is reasonable to assume that with the access of information that the citizen has, elected and appointed public executives should be, and can be, efficient, economical and involved.

Frustrated with re-cycled political issues the public is vociferously seeking solutions to apparently more immediate environmental and people oriented problems such as: air and water quality, resource consumption and replacement, protection of natural and scenic lands and the design of urban leisure space. These issues are indeed important and tantamount to ultimately determining quality of life. Hence, one must understand some basic fundamentals regarding the public sector and private sector decision making processes.

Each of these significant environmental issues interfaces with the management of public recreation resources and therefore commands sound policy and decision making. But enthusiasm for good management is one thing; understanding the nature of it, to say nothing of achieving it, is another.

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT VS. PRIVATE MANAGEMENT

Management in the public sector differs quite dramatically from management in the private sector even though both definitively affect the environment in which we live. One often assumes that both sectors enjoy the same basic decision making fundamentals and qualities--they do not!

In the business world, as in all sectors of private industry, the most effective measurement of managerial efficiency is profit. A company solidly managed will show a corporate profit (certainly the primary objective) while hopefully meeting the professional needs of the employees as well. The public manager on the other hand does not enjoy the illusion of a profit index marking his administrative resourcefulness. If indeed revenues received exceed revenues expended the public manager is often criticized for lack of forecast ability. But profit in many respects is not the only gratifying consequence of managerial effort. The public recreation administrator, like other public administrators has ample real and intrinsic rewards for effective decision making even if they do not include "bonuses," bit titles or penthouse privileges. Improving the environment aesthetically can be extremely rewarding. Providing parks, greenbelt areas, and preserving open space is one means of improving quality of life through visual interpretation. Innovative programming that goes beyond human necessity and stimulates needs achievement is another "profit" motive in providing human services.

It is, indeed, a challenge to serve the public as is so sensitively expressed by O.G. Stahl: (8)

if the average person appreciated the enormous complexity of most government programs, the sheer magnitude of any public undertaking by a great nation, the hazards in all collective action, the absurdities and contradictions of controlling legislation, the unrelenting pressures imposed by special interest groups, the frustrations caused by overweening managerial constraints, the lack of attention to persistence of dedicated civil servants genuinely interested in their work and its objectives and the truly substantial achievements in protecting the very difficult to

define "Public interest" he would be as defensive and proud as I am.

Unhappily not everyone shares this same opinion of public administrators, their purpose or their organizational motives. However, these motives are defined by citizens it is imperative to examine the managerial handicaps which accompany public sector administration.

PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT RESTRAINTS

Public sector recreation managers amongst other things, must:

Accept goals that are set by organizations other than their own.

This is especially true in Parks and Recreation management. The multiplicity of organizational involvement in the delivery of leisure services is staggering. Often human service objectives are determined by interagency relationships attempting to avoid the duplication of service. This can involve everyone from the YMCA and Red Cross to State Institutions for the mentally disturbed and maximum security Prisons. Often, too departmental goals are set by commissions, boards or councils who may not understand or appreciate the significance of an immediate public recreation service. Many recreation managers inherit their objectives and therefore lose a good deal of individual creative challenge. Secondly, public recreation managers must:

Operate structures designed by groups other than their own.

As a profession recreation is undergoing constant changes. The most dynamic of these changes deals with design capabilities of structures, facilities and outdoor recreation areas. Our traditional park systems are inadequate in many respects and there is a trend toward regionalizing multi-use park areas. Municipalities are utilizing many new techniques in an attempt to acquire land for recreational development. Linear parks, or narrow stretches of land not often considered acceptable for park space are an example of this innovative acquisition technique. Railroad lines that are no longer used, utility easements and corridors, irrigation channels and floodplains are examples of recreation space which can be acquired through a lease arrangement, even free or very economically. Although the linear shape restricts certain activities, these parks are very popular for jogging trails, bicycle paths and scenic walkways. Development costs are minimal yet public interest in this new form of municipal park has been enthusiastic. Public parks and recreation managers, however, usually must adapt their ideas and programs to existing facilities which oftentimes perpetuates previous administrative objectives.

An additional drawback to the public recreation management situation is:

Working with people whose careers are in many respects outside management's control.

Perhaps the most significant difference between public and private management is the impact of elected officials on public management's decision making process. The private manager is usually promoted from within the organization. He (or she) knows that in order to alter the direction of the corporation he needs to change the organization's structure and its people. This is normally his first move and almost without exception, he makes changes among the key people modifying their jobs and the systems structure. (3)

In contrast one can describe public officials as outsiders who enter office with cherished policy objectives, accomplish little, and leave office with unfulfilled desires for structural reform; for, in order to accomplish important political objectives having to do with due process and responsiveness to the citizens the system has very nearly denied the public executive the tools of management. Manipulating organizational structure, and people which are the private managers key resources, become the public managers key restraints. (1)

Working with appointed boards and commissions can also have drawbacks. Although commissions are charged with the responsibility of linking the citizen with the decision making process this responsibility is often by-passed, giving way to special interests based on geography or recreational preference.

Supportive agencies can also put certain restraints on the public recreation manager's effectiveness. If a parks department is dependent on the building maintenance department, for example, for facility upkeep, the resulting "trade off" in labor and other "favors" to assure task completion can be very nearly counter productive.

Working through personnel departments in the public sector can be a frustrating experience as well. Although virtually every system has "must hires" public parks and recreation agencies are besieged each year with requests for summer jobs for the offspring and "friends" of employees in supportive public agencies. (6) Recreation has yet to shed its public image of being a "fun and games" profession on all levels. Personnel problems however may be reduced considerably, through a standardization of professional education requirements, job descriptions and task orientation. A fourth restraint on the public recreation manager is that he must:

Accomplish goals in less time than is allowed corporate managers.

Time constraints on public managers often make it hard to mobilize resources in order to achieve the desired objectives. Management strategy in business usually means giving corporate executives the opportunity to implement long range programs aimed at establishing that particular corporation as a viable commercial entity. There are some notable examples. It took I.B.M. almost 10 years to establish itself as a leader in developing and marketing computers.(4) They did, however follow a management strategy designed (long term) to establish I.B.M. as a leader in computer development. Because of the success of this strategy the 10 year time frame was considered necessary, even appropriate, and was beyond reproach. Public executives haven't nearly as much time to develop and implement their management strategies.

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT GOALS

The goal of the public recreation manager upon taking office is to "get things done." This may mean things that are politically expedient, it could mean beginning new programs germane to the public interest or it may be seeking new funding sources or acquiring open space. In any event the public executive hopes that when he (she) leaves office, he will have the satisfaction of accomplishment as well as the prospect of the office, and the person, becoming more useful; gaining personal and professional respect and increasing opportunities for participation in decision making processes.

The immediate horizons of public recreation management offers some grand opportunities in furthering new concepts and developing and integrating new systematic approaches in administrative behavior. Technology has provided an impressive list of new and vastly improved recreation materials for use in parks and playground development. The use of fiberglass and graphite have made recreation equipment lighter, more durable and even less expensive. Maintenance techniques are becoming refined and the use of plastics has aided efficiency to many areas of park maintenance. Computers have made scheduling and information storage and retrieval much simpler and more organized with programs being developed specifically for parks and recreation areas. And then, too, new administrative and management techniques are available such as management by objectives (M.B.O.), decision making models and systems analysis. (5) Developments like these provide the public manager with new incentives, different challenges and expanded rewards.

Like his counterpart in the private sector the public Parks and Recreation manager seeks a share of the rewards generated by his organization's activity. Since this share cannot include the profits of government, he usually seeks such goals as salary, the perquisites of office, and the intangible rewards of serving the public. The intangible rewards may be ephemeral or real, but ideologically they are as important in the public sector as the private motive is in business. These intangibles include influencing policy, changing the direction of events, and helping others. Common to all of them is the pleasure of exercising power usefully. Power is a necessary element of effectiveness and a reward for efficiency.

FRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Although the goals of private and public sector managers are quite similar, that is, the best possible product for the most effective cost, we have seen that vast differences in organizational structure preclude attaining these ends in similar fashion. The public recreation manager, even though restricted by time, people and political implications can, however, develop an effective management strategy that will justify, develop, market, and perpetuate his product.

In the 1980's with the emphasis on fiscal responsibility, efficiency, effectiveness and improved performance all government funded programs are expected to be able to justify their very existence. (4) Although not a new concept to parks and recreation, justification in the past has been directed toward city councils, county commissioners, legislators and other funding resources. This strategy, much like business' now is geared towards marketing programs for public acceptance. Any successful program will perpetuate itself through citizen interest

and involvement even if public funding should stop. Preventative health programs, aerobic exercise and dance and many league sports are examples of self sustaining fee basis programs that began as public recreation.

Management by objectives, a strategy once applicable primarily to private industry is being adapted and utilized by public recreation administrators. Essentially a process of superior and subordinate managers jointly identifying common organizational goals, defining individual responsibilities and determining operating guidelines M.B.O. encourages maximum personnel involvement in all areas of system development and delivery. The M.B.O. system must be highly structured, each action carefully planned, explained and managed. Charles Clegg offers the following overview of the M.B.O. system as it is applied to the Parks and Recreation Field. (2)

1. Develop organizational objectives based on the mission statement of the organization. The top personnel set overall, general objectives upon which the rest of the department staff will base their specific objectives.
2. Develop unit objectives. Both supervisors and subordinates establish their own specific objectives based upon broad organizational objectives.
3. Implement Action Plans. Supervisors and subordinates work together in a spirit of cooperation to achieve the objectives.
4. Continually review progress. Feedback sessions between supervisors and subordinates to identify and solve problems, to remove obstacles, to review performances and to modify objectives and action plans, if needed, are held.
5. Take corrective action. Changes to rectify problems identified through the informal progress reviews are made.
6. Conduct formal evaluations. Annually, the supervisor will conduct an appraisal of his subordinates' performances. The supervisor evaluates achievements in terms of the degree to which each subordinate accomplished his objectives.

Perhaps more times than not administrative reorganization of public agencies occurs solely for reasons of economy and efficiency. Though a functional concept cost effectiveness is a quantitative strategy and can severely alter long term, as well as short term administrative objectives. (7) The recreation manager in order to assure continuity of programming goals and too, enjoy the fruits of his labor, must accommodate change and structure his public "system" so that it will:

1. Facilitate expansion or elimination of a program
2. Adapt to, or change program emphasis
3. Respond to, or satisfy public input
4. Provide adequate recreational space

These ideas can, and should, react to the dynamic and immediate needs, preferences and attitudes of the recreation populace as Americans each year expand their leisure interests and become more elective and specialized in their leisure activities.

There are vast differences, and on occasion, clear similarities in the administration of public and private institutions. Much has been written about private enterprise and its management successes and failures yet today's focus is clearly directed at better understanding our public domain. Since the early 1970's when Americans were awakened to administrative inadequacies at the highest levels there has been a desire to scrutinize public managers and their administrative capabilities. This has helped in recognizing the infinite number of variables in public management and created a foundation for comparison of public and private management principles. These comparisons are essential in continuing to research human organizational skills and processes and will be invaluable in the future not only to administrators but also, social scientists, educators and recreation practitioners.

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