Democracy In America Essay, Research Paper

Democracy or Not?

Each of us is aware that change is everywhere we look. No segment of society is exempt. We as the public are dealing with the advent of continuous and ever increasing change. Change in technology, change in resource availability, change in national demographics, change in workforce diversity, change in simply every facet of the organizational environment and context in which public institutions must operate. Change, as the saying goes, has truly become the only constant. The challenge for organizations is whether they can become flexible enough, fast enough. And will they do it on terms set by the organizational culture, and then adapt and succeed in the face of it or will they challenge the status quo and attempt to transform the prevailing culture. What follows is the story of a public organization, which is trying to change the context under which it performs rather than be changed by that context.

In the realm of Philosophy, as Erasmus of Rotterdam, the first truly great humanist of the modern age once said, “The intent suffices in a great design”. Erasmus, no doubt was right. However, beyond simple intent, or to phrase it in the current vernacular, vision, action is required to bring the vision to life. In any age, there are those individuals willing to challenge the status quo, whether it is in the field of politics, science, business, or public administration. If these individuals are to enjoy a measure of success, they must be willing to take an inordinate amount of risk and withstand criticism, indifference and cynicism from every quarter. Most importantly, they must have the capacity to envision a great design and then transform that vision into action.

A skeptic would find little or no relationship between philosophy and the modern practice of the public. A purist would probably go further and find offensive the very idea of comparing these two seemingly opposed disciplines. One, grounded in the metaphysical pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and the other, a pragmatic and practical effort to conduct the public’s business, appear to be at opposite ends of an intellectual continuum. Closer examination reveals that both disciplines share similar characteristics and both pursue parallel aims. Philosophy and public administration seek to understand human motivation, philosophy for the sake of pure knowledge, and public administration to harness this understanding to practical ends. Human apprehension and resistance to change is but one aspect of this understanding that is shared by both disciplines.

The idea of a flatter, more horizontal organization, one with a minimum number of organizational layers separating the front line employees from senior management is by no means new. Organizations, if one can call them that, in the early years of the industrial revolution consistently reflected an absolute minimum number of layers. Indeed, a face to face relationship often existed between ownership or management and the employee or worker. As methods of production grew increasingly complex and the principles of scientific management were applied, more and more layers of organizational structure were created. Organizations being ongoing entities, these layers tended to become permanent features of the organizational landscape, often well beyond the time where they re original intent and usefulness has become obsolete. The private as well as the public sectors has found that the pressures of operating successful enterprises in an ever-changing competitive world, demand new management approaches. A realization has emerged that a principal impediment to the rapid response to a changing environment is organizational structure.

Cultures

Slowly at first, and with increasing intensity as the weeks went by, a document that was to serve as an organizational blueprint began to take shape. Five propositions were to serve as the guiding principles:

• We will treat all human beings with respect and dignity.

• Sharing is not a weakness.

• No one will lose compensation.

• No one will lose his or her job.

• A high priority will be given to training employees in new skills.

The organization, which was to emerge, was to strive to become boundaryless, free from the confines of the hierarchical past, and organized around processes rather than functions. We desired to become a customer-oriented, fast, focused, flexible, friendly and fun organization. But here again the government felt as though they need to step in.

We carefully blended concepts from a diverse variety of management thinkers. As we met in community meetings, every idea and suggestion that complemented our vision of the future organization was documented on video and considered.

If we valued the people as assets, then we had to come to respect them. Our habits and organizational routines stripped people of initiative and pride. People frequently did “leave their brains in the parking lot” as a way of coping with the nature of the anything. They did it because the message we sent through all of our command and control structures, most notably, that people shouldn’t do anymore than what the job description said. And we reinforced this with compensation systems that rewarded this behavior.

We had to set these human resources free. The people of the U.S. needed to feel that they had a right to exercise the freedom to think and the freedom to act. We would work very hard to demonstrate we were credible on this point. Until we could free all of our assets and apply them to the services we render, it was hopeless to believe that our customer focus could be evident.

Individually, we hope to achieve meaningful and lasting contributions. To do this, we must first look inward and objectively determine what our strengths and weaknesses are. Ideally, we should be able to use the benefits of the former to slowly erode the drawbacks of the latter. Persistence and patience, coupled with the use of character, should allow us to achieve this end.

Organizations, however, rely on the interdependent actions of the individuals that comprise it. Therefore, if these individuals hope to enact any significant changes they must first ensure that there is a commonality of purpose, a shared vision. Importantly, this vision must be embraced by and apply to each and every one of the members. In this fashion, interdependence and commonality of purpose can be achieved.

Principles

Governments have found that they can legislate laws that define what is acceptable and what is not just as proven by Alexis de Tocqueville. This definition of acceptability is accompanied with a corresponding punishment. Governments draft, approve and enforce laws. They cannot, however, hope to legislate morals or morality. They have tried, and they have failed. That laws cannot prevent human beings from killing each another is not tragic. It is only one’s conscience, based on the moral principles under which we were raised, that prevent us from breaking the law. The laws of the land say we must be punished, but the same laws are powerless to prevent us from killing does this sound just to you. Laws are the manifestation of the moral principles we all learned as children. They are the shared morality, the ethics, of a nation.

We felt the need to create a code of ethics based on simple common sense principles derived from a general consensus. This was of paramount importance in our quest. To that end, we adopted our foundational principles. We choose to define empowerment, as the freedom to think and the freedom to act, with the appropriate knowledge of the responsibilities linked with the exercise of power.

The first principle, to treat each other with respect and dignity, was embraced by all as the most important guiding principle. The second, that sharing is not a weakness, required a huge shift in perception. To view sharing as strength, rather than as a weakness, becomes very important in the context of the chaos of large-scale change. Without these principles, we could not proceed to fundamentally re-invent ourselves.

There are a number of desired talents that any organization needs from its members in order to achieve excellence. Competence, becomes a de facto assumption, for without it the attainment of our goals and objectives is doomed to failure. However, competence, by itself, does not constitute the only element in this formula. Character is the catalyst that binds all the diverse organizational elements into a coherent whole. In fact, character is probably considerably more desirable than competence. Most organizations believe that you can teach skills to create or supplement competence, but you can not teach, dictate, or prescribe character. The third essential talent is intuition. We each have an inner voice which, when combined in the presence of character and competence allows us to do great things. This is a sadly an often ignored reality of leadership. Perhaps one day soon the people of today s times will start seeing what minority groups of the government would just prefer we not.

When will they realize?

When will they see?

How can they justify,

Crippling me?

Was it not our right

From the day we were born

To stand up and fight

For our view of the norm

They tell us they’re trying

To make us more pure

They tell us they’re trying

To give us the cure

Come on you guys

Up on Capitol Hill

You’re way off the base

In pushing this Bill

Back off from our freedom

Back off from our space

It’s time that you realized,

We’re setting the pace.

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