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## High-Performance Government

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A recent national telephone survey by the Gallup Management Journal tells it like it is. Across the nation, only 26 percent of all employees are actively engaged in their work; 55 percent are not engaged; and 19 percent are actively disengaged. Not being engaged seems bad enough, but imagine what actively disengaged would mean where you work!

Think about the employees who are actively engaged, how valuable they are, how much we count on them to get the extraordinary things done in our organizations. What would it be like if we could increase their number and fully engage the untapped potential of all workers in our governments?

We'd be really successful at our work, anticipating what citizens need and want from us; developing our vision of what we could become and aligning our strategies, structures, and systems to accomplish that vision; integrating the various parts of our governments so that the customer has a seamless, positive experience; and following the lead of our values-driven staff: energized, empowered, and anticipating future challenges. We'd really be realizing higher performance in our organizations.

Ha! You say; dream on. But wait. This article shows how this "dream" is possible. It discusses using the high-performance organization (HPO) model to help local governments do just that, improve their performance.

One reason why many organizations find themselves with disengaged workers is related to some legacies of the industrial revolution. Before that upheaval, most work was done by individuals or families who approached their work holistically. They performed all the leadership and management work for their businesses or farms, as well as doing the physical tasks.

With the industrial revolution, production began to take advantage of new technology that used lots of cheap labor. Organizational patterns arose that divided up the work. Leadership became the responsibility of the people at the top; management responsibility fell in the middle; and tasks became the "dirty work" that only labor--the underclass--would do.

Management was divided among functional specialists and lower-level supervisors. The work was simplified so that the workers could do repetitive tasks. They didn't need to think or see the big picture; they just needed to follow directions.

Many local governments have their roots in this model. Look at the typical organization chart. Leadership comes from the top, and managers are there to manage their piece of the organization and to be sure that labor gets the job done. Line workers look for direction and disengage from responsibility for anything other than what they are specifically assigned to do.

Legacies of this model persist in departments responsible only for their unconnected pieces of the pie. Rigidity derives from the belief that there is only one right way to do things; innovation and creativity come only from the top or from outside the organization; and inherited systems like human resources, procurement, and budget support the other legacies with their restrictions and controls.

In the next step of this evolution, we must reform our organizations so that workers are actively engaged in leadership, management, and task functions. Too much information exists for it all to be controlled at the top. Decisions have to be made more quickly than is allowed by the "up the flagpole and down again"

regimen. Human resources are too valuable for us not to use the creativity and energy of all individuals. We need to return to the holistic notions that preceded the industrial revolution, but with the addition of the team skills needed for collaborative success.

The HPO model exemplifies a framework that can assist organizations in networking their talents to improve their performance.<sup>1</sup> Performance improvement begins when leaders focus attention on big questions like: What is high performance? How would we know if we were high-performing? And, why try to be high-performing in the first place?

### **Change Levers**

There are certain interdependent "change levers" that an organization can apply to examine its capabilities and performance. Much of the HPO model revolves around a specific notion of leadership, which is the first lever. Leadership is not the charismatic personal qualities sometimes referred to in management courses but rather a specific set of functions that every person at every level has an appropriate role in performing (see Figure 1). A leadership philosophy statement sets the organizational context for widespread participation in leadership work.

Vision, which is the next lever, is not something that is unilaterally decided at the top, sent down, and then hung on the wall like a plaque, to be ignored. Rather, it is the product of engagement within the organization, which in turn triggers thoughtful, collaborative development by people at lower levels of their own vision, which will "nest" within the higher-level vision.

#### **Figure 1. Leadership Functions**

- Strategic customer-value analysis.
- Connection of vision and values to strategy, structure, and systems.
- Supra-systems integration and stewardship.
- Learning, thinking, changing, and renewing.
- Enabling, empowering, and energizing.

After this step comes a strategic thinking process, leading to the adoption of three- to-five-year strategies likely to assure measurable progress toward realizing the vision, plus the specific tactical plans and resource allocations to accomplish these strategies, with processes for monitoring and corrective actions. Organizational systems and structures need to be reviewed to assure that they support the achievement of the strategies. Too often, inherited systems determine how people do business rather than a desire to follow the needs of specifically stated business strategies. Or, we develop the structural changes and then figure out strategies that fit them.

Another lever is the value system. Starting with a core set of organizational values, teams of employees can identify specific behaviors that support or violate that value system. Once these shared expectations have been made clear, a system of providing feedback among subordinates, peers, and bosses will allow people the best chance to conform their actions to these values. The incorporation of values into the work culture in turn will lead to higher performance.

As the model recognizes, change efforts traditionally have come and gone, like fads of the week. When such efforts start, they are typically overwhelmed by the press of daily business, by factors that Stephen Covey calls both urgent and either important or unimportant. There usually is no dedicated time and place to focus on what he calls the important but not urgent work of leadership that builds productive capacity.<sup>2</sup>

## **Parallel Organizations**

Work toward change flourishes when the hierarchy is suspended and team members work in a fully participative manner. So, the model suggests forming a parallel organization with a radically different leadership atmosphere. In this parallel organization, two things are achieved simultaneously.

First, people work at establishing and mastering a process for interacting with each other in a collaborative and nonhierarchical way.

Second, they practice this process by actually performing the thinking work that constitutes the function(s) of leadership appropriate to their level of the organization. Ultimately, habits of full participation become so ingrained that they influence how people behave in the hierarchy. Yes, the hierarchy remains over the long term; it is the place where the plans developed in the parallel organization are implemented; it's where the doing side of the work takes place.

The model suggests that every level of the organization has suitable leadership work, to be accomplished collaboratively so as to assure the success of the microbusinesses operating at the front line. The concept of the parallel organization is the essential factor in generating the engagement of front-line workers in playing their parts in the achievement of the overall vision.

Two local governments that learned about the model through the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service now share their experiences in using it to improve their own performance.

### **Case Study: Great Falls, Montana**

The city of Great Falls has been actively involved in the HPO process since December 1996. Two major components on which Great Falls has based its efforts are the formation of parallel teams and the development of a leadership philosophy. The parallel-team concept is a cornerstone of the city's success because it provides a safe environment in which to discuss issues relating to the organization or to a department. Unlike staff meetings, which are task-driven and often run by management, when the parallel teams come together there is no hierarchy, and the group determines the direction. This is where the work of leadership is done. (Decisions made in the parallel mode, however, also must work in the hierarchy.)

The HPO process began with an initial leadership team consisting of the city manager, department heads, two city commissioners, the mayor, and several other staff members. This was a parallel team in theory, but early discussions made it clear that creating a true parallel team would be difficult. Attendance at the meetings always has been voluntary, although department heads have made a commitment to the process from the beginning.

Most of the first year was devoted to educating this group about the HPO process and developing a leadership philosophy, vision, and mission. Consultants provided training and facilitation of the process. Meetings were held every two weeks for four hours. This was a major commitment of time and resources, and staff members were truly operating in what Steven Covey describes as Quadrant-II time (important but not urgent). Department heads discussed expanding the process in these early months but decided to wait until they understood it better and were able to "walk the talk."

For many years, the city has conducted long-term planning and goal-setting sessions. Through the HPO process, however, a discussion continued over the course of several months, culminating in a two-day retreat held in May 1997 for department heads and the city commission to complete the leadership philosophy, vision, mission, and goals. Since then, the retreats have continued each year and have proven to be valuable chances for the commission and staff to develop stronger working relationships.

In December 1997, the public works department started its own parallel team, consisting of approximately 25 people including the department head, division heads, supervisors, foremen, and administrative assistant.

In July 1998, the city hired a facilitator on a half-time basis to oversee the process. Since that time, other departments have started the HPO process, including community development, fairgrounds, fire, the housing authority, parks and recreation, fiscal services, and planning.

As a result, the organizational culture is slowly changing to meet the changing expectations of the community. Relationships among department heads have been strengthened. By taking the time to step back from day-to-day tasks and focus on the larger vision of the organization, department heads have been able to talk with each other and not at each other.

Formal and informal conversations have taken place in which department heads have come to understand the challenges in other departments and have offered assistance. Through discussions based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (a personality assessment tool), department heads have gained a better understanding of the similarities and differences in personality types and in approaches to problem solving. While such factors are difficult to measure, the dynamics and openness of the group have changed significantly in the past four years. There appears to be more direct communication and less posturing.

Great Falls's 12 distinct departments at times have operated more independently than collectively. While department heads have always had good relations with one another, the HPO process has helped combat any underlying territoriality and thus has improve responsiveness to the community.

As a member of one of the departmental HPO groups has said, "Creating a parallel team is an unnatural process." Many employees are accustomed to the established hierarchy. It is difficult to move to the parallel-team idea, in which everyone is equal, decisions are made for the good of the whole, and honesty, openness, and trust are cornerstones.

This is especially true for people positioned further down the traditional hierarchy. Parallel teams are powerful tools for breaking through barriers to organizational change. But breaking through the barriers against creating a parallel team may be the key to success with the HPO process.

Great Falls still has challenges ahead of it. Issues still get raised and addressed within the traditional leadership-team structure. Creating a parallel team, however, has allowed discussions to occur that might not have taken place before.

The true test of this process is how the strategies, structures, and systems change to meet the new challenges. And this is the hard part of any change process. Great Falls knows that it must first create the environment in which discussions can take place before action can be taken. It is truly an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, process.

### **Case Study: Windsor, Connecticut**

Windsor's HPO process was built on the town council's strategic priorities and on the organization's vision statement and values. The town manager articulated five strategy areas, then, during the summer and fall of 1999, interdisciplinary strategy teams were established in each of these areas from a mix of department directors, division managers, and line employees.

These teams have figured as the primary examples of Windsor's parallel organizational structure. Each team has chosen a facilitator and still operates within a set of parameters that suspend the normal hierarchical rules, focus on reaching the best solutions possible for the whole, and foster a low-threat/high-trust environment.

Initial tasks included devising a mission statement and generating a set of goals. For each goal, one team member was selected as champion, the person responsible for coordinating a task team and writing a proposed action plan. Each team finalized a multiyear business plan with specific action steps, a metric or performance measurement set, resource needs, and a proposed timeline.

Following are brief descriptions of the five strategy areas.

**Healthy community.** The mission of the healthy-community strategy is to promote safe, beautiful, and desirable neighborhoods for all current and potential residents, businesses, and visitors by providing high quality essential local services and encouraging individual involvement and partnering. Through addressing matters of aesthetics, safety, and neighborhood cohesion, activity in this area has a direct impact on Windsor's quality of life.

**Healthy people.** The healthy-people mission is to foster a vital, creative, and productive Windsor by promoting the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of all people who live, work, and travel in the community through participation in the schools, the town, and/or a specific community. In collaboration with all major stakeholders, this strategy team has launched a townwide campaign involving the departments of family and leisure services, library services, health and social services, and public schools, as well as area hospitals and other community health care and social service providers.

**Broad-based development.** Windsor's success in attracting corporate and industrial development has been widely recognized. Building upon the town's past success and its streamlined permitting process, the team's mission is to help produce a full-service community that enhances a high quality of life for all who live, work, and play in Windsor through exceptional municipal services and development opportunities. Participants include representatives of the departments of planning, economic and community development, design, and financial services, and the town manager's office.

**Healthy organization.** This strategy area supports continuous efforts to improve performance and achieve top priorities. The strategy team's mission is to ensure the alignment of all policies, procedures, and operational plans with the town's values and strategic priorities. Employees from human resources, police, library services, health and social services, public works, family and leisure services, financial services, and the town manager's office compose this strategy team.

**Marketing and communications.** The marketing and communications strategy was developed to find a "brand name" for Windsor. Currently, what might be called the brand-name image is one of a diverse community with extensive recreational and leisure opportunities. The team seeks to increase public awareness of all that the town has to offer, to manage an events program to attract visitors, and to establish relationships with realtors and area businesses to promote Windsor as a place both to live and to work. Team members include representatives of the town manager's office, human resources, economic and community development, library services, family and leisure services, and Windsor's public schools.

#### **Linking Strategy to Department Business Plans**

During the summer of 2000, the extended leadership team began the next level of strategic business planning. Each department was asked to develop a strategic plan linked to the overall business plan, as developed by the five strategy teams. This link would generate a map delineating how each action plan would be implemented at the department level and would allow for the required department- and organization-wide resources to be identified.

Following the strategy-team structure, each department created a business-plan matrix, including specific action steps, a metric or performance measurement set, a champion, a list of required resources, and a target date for completion. In the fall of 2000, a three-hour "walkabout" session involved all members of the five strategy teams and of the extended leadership team.

Staff members were asked to "walkabout" to identify any overlapping action plans, conflicting goals, unrealistic timelines, and potential gaps in resources. Based on the feedback from the walkabout, departments and strategy teams were given 30 days to review and refine their respective business-plan matrixes.

A series of tactics ensures that implementation of the plans stays on course. Each month, the extended leadership team receives a verbal status report from facilitators of the strategy teams. Quarterly, the strategy teams and the extended leadership team meet for milestone updates and for identification of any needed resources.

Meanwhile, department directors meet monthly with their key staff members to review implementation efforts. An additional effort to help ensure that strategic business plans are on track is to incorporate them into each department director's annual performance evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup>. The HPO model was developed by John W. Pickering and Robert E. Matson and described in "Building High-Performance Organizations for the Twenty-First Century: Lessons from the Charleston Naval Shipyard" by Tom Porter, John Pickering, and Gerry Brokaw (January 1995)

<sup>2</sup>. Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994)

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