Good Intentions and Hard Work Are Not Enough: Review of: Levy, P. F., (2001). The Nut Island Effect: When Good Teams Go Wrong

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Mediocrity in human services

Wolfensberger (1978), in his review of approximately 400 PASS (Wolfensberger and Glenn, 1975) assessments of diverse human services, concluded that such services were overwhelmingly of mediocre quality. Robert Flynn (1999) in his more recent review of over 1,400 PASS and PASSING (Wolfensberger and Thomas, 1983) assessments and of the related literature, found that not much had changed: Human services continued, on average, to be of mediocre quality, or in the parlance of PASSING, "poor to acceptable." Picking up on a United Kingdom study by Felce and Perry (1997), Flynn observed that "community service personnel often appear to lack the organized means and competencies necessary to promote the personal development and social integration of the people whom they serve" (p. 341). Wolfensberger (1978) went further suggesting that the people involved in services of mediocre (or worse) quality would not be able to recognize the failings of their endeavor and would rebel at the suggestion that they provided services that were anything less than excellent.

PASS and PASSING use a very demanding metric where human service programs are compared to operationally defined ideal conditions: To do well—on PASSING and for clients—a program must be recognizably excellent. The data briefly reviewed above would suggest that such an evaluation scheme tends to demonstrate that excellence in human service program performance is rare indeed. Are human services particularly vulnerable to mediocrity and are there equally demanding evaluation schemes in other sectors of human endeavor? Are organizational and management factors the same for human services and other sectors or, in other words, do the people involved know when they are doing well or poorly?

I've recently had occasion to selectively review the professional management literature where a growing body of literature has been interested in defining and measuring excellence in industrial, commercial and public sectors. Indeed popular magazines such as Maclean's, (in Canada), the US News & World (in the USA), and Consumer Reports (in the USA) regularly publish lists of the best universities, hospitals and other such services. The management literature seems to be awash with books and articles about quality or excellence which might lead one to conclude that industry and commerce have triumphantly attained what we in human services are rarely able to achieve. However, such is not the case. In his recent review, Jim Collins (2001) asked the question "Can a good company become a great company and, if so, how?" (p. 69) Using a variety of demanding financial performance indicators, the research team reviewed 1,435 companies that appeared on the Fortune 500 list from 1965 to 1995 and found only 11 good to great examples. After their transition from good to great, these eleven companies outperformed all other companies by significant and even dramatic margins. Richard Foster and Sarah Kaplan (2001) used a different evaluation scheme with similar results. In their financial review of over 1000 of the US's most important companies, they found that not a single American corporation was able to sustain financial performance excellence over time. Indeed, since 1917, no American company has outperformed the stock market over time, an indicator of what we might call average corporate performance.

One might quarrel with how these metrics are constructed, just as one might disagree with the evaluation scheme used in PASS or PASSING. One might also scoff at such dramatic results that seem to contradict the triumphalism that one encounters in the popular media. Such results also contradict the personal experience of so many employees and managers who do work hard, who join their field with the best of intentions, and who tend to focus on their effort and intentions—rather than their results—as validation and an indicator of "a job well done." However the realization that excellence is rare, by definition, and requires internal evaluation and rigorous external scrutiny, seems to be gaining currency across many sectors.

The Nut Island effect

The Harvard Business Review is one of the pre-eminent business management journals in the world. It provides monthly critical reviews of management practices and case studies of organizational performance. Recently, P. F. Levy (2001) presented a case study of the disastrous Nut Island waste water treatment plant that should ring a bell with most readers who have been involved in PASS or PASSING assessment teams. Levy provides an engaging analysis of what went wrong, and one might easily imagine the reaction of Nut Island managers and staff as they read this report in the Harvard Business Review; probably not very different from the reaction of many interested readers of PASS and PASSING evaluation reports. It would seem that what PASS and PASSING teams tend to observe in human services has resonance in other sectors of formalized human endeavor.

They were hardworking, uncomplaining, and dedicated beyond the call of duty. Yet the extraordinary team that ran a vital wastewater treatment plant actually brought about disaster. How could such well-intentioned people produce such perverse results? They fell prey to an organizational pathology that can strike any business (p. 51).

In 1952, the Nut Island sewage treatment plant went into operation to help clean up the Boston Harbor. "The Nut Island plant was billed as a solution to Quincy's wastewater problem. Hailed in the local press for its modern design, it was supposed to treat all the sewage produced in the southern half of the Boston metropolitan area..." (p. 53).

But then in the mid 1960s, Nut Island was not a happy place. There were many internal conflicts and the plant was not running efficiently. A number of individuals were then hired into key management positions and developed into a cohesive team that made the plant a model of efficiency. "The people they hired were much like themselves: Hardworking, grateful for the security of a public sector job, and happy to stay out of the spotlight." Many were veterans of the Korean War, accustomed to hard work and difficult working conditions.

Over time, and partly because of its efficiency and self sufficiency, Nut Island became isolated from its headquarters which were also responsible for many other public facilities such as parks, skating rinks and swimming pools. The plant was a self-sufficient island where every show of interest from corporate senior managers was seen as an unwelcome intrusion. This neglect was not so benign: Corporate managers systematically underfunded sewage treatment generally and the Nut Island plant in particular. The clean well-maintained appearance of the Nut Island plant belied its deeper condition: Its equipment had serious defects that would have required major investments to correct and improve. Unfortunately, plant and senior managers were reassured by Nut Island's patina of efficiency, thus allowing upper management to focus on other business that seemed more pressing.

Over these intervening years, the Nut Island team forgot what they were there for. They were more interested in running an efficient plant that didn't break down than in actually seeing to the cleaning of Boston Harbor. Thus, the staff at Nut Island would correct or compensate for the ineffectiveness of its processes by using dangerous and counter productive chemicals, or by circumventing the required procedures, for instance by dumping raw or semi-treated sewage into the harbor. A prime requirement for the team was to meet government standards: "…To the Nut Islanders themselves, making the permit was proof in itself that they were alleviating the harbor's pollution." However, this also involved "strenuous denials when outsiders pointed out inconvenient facts." For instance, the sludge produced at the plant was often rejected as being inappropriate for use as fertilizer. The members of the Nut Island management group as well as all the staff at the plant were dedicated individuals, often working unpaid overtime, submitting themselves to very dangerous situations and going so far as to pay out of their own pockets to purchase materials and equipment that the plant desperately needed.

The Nut Island team was disbanded after thirty years of effort that left the harbor no cleaner than it was in the late 1960s when the core team first came together (p. 59).

I am convinced, though, that when good people are put in a situation in which they inexorably do the wrong things, it is not normal or unavoidable. It is tragic. It is a cruel waste of human passion and energy, and a deep-seated threat to an organization's mission and bottom line (p. 59).

The author goes on to state that his review of management literature found no author who had identified or named the circumstances and effects that he describes in his article. He proposes the "Nut Island effect" as a way to identify such circumstances which, he indicates, are far more common than we might want to acknowledge.

Conclusion

It would seem that bringing together a group of hard working, well-intentioned and even innovative individuals is not sufficient to produce good results. Moreover, it is also clear that meeting minimal government standards is no guarantee of effectiveness. Indeed, such standards may be easily circumvented or become the most important and time consuming task of managers in an organization, such that they run the risk of forgetting the true mandate and mission that an organization might have.

There is a sense in which the Nut Island staff and the senior corporate officers, who were responsible for them, should have been obliged to swim and drink of the waters of Boston Harbor on a regular basis. Or at the very least, the regular monitoring of water quality around

Nut Island and the health of people along the shoreline might have been good proxy indicators of how well they were doing their job.

Of course, the same applies to human service organizations which are more and more subjected to a great deal of government scrutiny and where managers and other staff spend increasing amounts of time meeting government standards, which are not necessarily good proxy indicators of quality, excellence or effectiveness. The fact that managers of an organization are likeable and hard working is meaningless until there is outcome data indicating that they are truly making a positive difference in the lives of individuals who require and receive their services.

Thus, one cannot depend on an individual's or a team's self-assessment of their accomplishments. This is certainly one of the findings often experienced by external evaluators. When evaluation teams give their reports, they should not be surprised when they are met with howls of disapproval or stony silence. By and large, individual managers, staff and work teams, including those who are hard working and well-intentioned, tend to have self-serving views of their accomplishments and of the processes they apply and are experts in. Thus, when they do receive negative feedback, they tend to dismiss it or react to it with hostility. On Nut Island, hard work and isolation combined to create a situation where individuals and teams live within a fiction where "maintaining the alternate reality that prevailed on Nut Island required more than wishful thinking... It also involved strenuous denials when outsiders pointed out inconvenient facts" (p. 59).

Thus, the necessity of ensuring external scrutiny and evaluation on a periodic basis and the importance of monitoring output and outcome data combined with a strong sense of objective criticism are prerequisites to ensuring effective management. Hard work and good intentions are simply not enough. This is particularly relevant in light of the use of concepts such as "best practice." Too often, concepts such as best practice are nothing more than a consensual way of identifying and validating current endeavors and current methodologies in the absence of effectiveness data and outside evaluation. What makes them "best" is self-satisfaction and a fair amount of strain and sweat. Quality, excellence and effectiveness however, might be altogether different and require the ongoing use of outcome/effectiveness indicators and periodic outside evaluation (Flynn, Lemay, Ghazal & Hébert, in press). It might, for some, seem like a stretch to suggest that industrial management, including this case study of a sewage treatment plant, has relevance to human service management and program evaluation. However, results, outcomes, evaluation and excellence are themes that one encounters time and again in a variety of management circles and human enterprise. Moreover, personal and collective effort and good intentions—not to mention a smidgen of self-interest—seem to everywhere cloud the objective assessment of quality and outcome.

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