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Strategic Management in a Networked World

Christine Gibbs Springer

As technology transforms communication, collaboration and the ways in which individuals receive their information and news, so too it is changing the way that managers function by forcing government and NGOs to become more flexible. This is necessary so that they are better able to sense and respond to a changing environment and better able to incorporate learning and technology as they manage effectively in a networked world while at the same time, maintaining credibility with key stakeholders.

Such a transformation is due in part to four major trends that have redefined good management from a plan-and-execute to a see-and-act model. The first trend began with the emergence of global data communication capabilities and has created a decomposition of work across time and space so that jobs get done across networks of temporally and geographically dispersed and often financially independent workgroups. The second trend began with distributed computer networks making expansive outputs and outcomes increasingly difficult to track and to manage.

The third trend began with the creation of new organizations and also the blurring of traditional demarcations between government, NGOs and business as well as between levels of government. The fourth major trend began when digital technology began driving a new government transparency, one that is paradoxically both more and less dependent on the will of the individual. As an example, in the Spring of 2007 word got out that a petrochemical plant was to be built near the center of a port city in southern China-Xiamen. In a nation not known for its transparency, news of the plan spread via email, blogs and text messages and a protest against the plant was staged. Protestors took photographs with their cell phones and posted them on websites as well as sending them to sympathetic media. Even the Wall Street Journal published an article about the protest. As a result, City officials postponed construction of the plant until a new study of its environmental impact could be completed.

Public administrators should consider applying five principles in their work life so as to strategically manage in a networked world:

• Embed sense-and-respond capabilities within normal plan-and-execute and performance measurement processes. The ability to both detect a problem or an opportunity early and correctly and to react effectively are key determinants of effective governance, delivery of services and the serving of the public interest.

• Adopt strategies that promote collaborative action among key partners and key stakeholders. As issues become more global in nature, such as clean energy and global warming, there is often a tendency to lose visibility of accurate action boundaries which often transcend jurisdictions. Unless there is a commitment to developing cooperative relationships with stakeholders through things like MOUs and Interstate Compacts, there will be no preferential assistance in dealing with either crises or opportunities.

• Value and nurture organizational learning and development. Organizations must collect, analyze and share across their networks and with stakeholders and organizational partners the knowledge about what works and what does not work. Without intelligent knowledge sharing, they will lack information to act decisively and effectively and will also lose valued workers to other agencies that understand the value of talent-powered organizations.

• Deploy technologies that enable intelligent adjustment to major events and environmental shifts. To effectively and efficiently adjust to changed conditions organizations must give managers the ability to apply information technologies that support the three previous principles by first, providing them with the ability to see the what, how much, where and when that define the agency’s internal and external environments, secondly, support analysis that analyzes patterns and anomalies in the data and thirdly, use mobile technologies to give managers on the move the capability to communicate with their primary places of work and the capability to acquire information where they are and to manipulate it or disseminate it as needed.

• Structure in transparency by creating the free flow of information within the agency and between the agency and key stakeholders and the public. Information flow simply means that critical information gets to the right person at the right time and for the right reason. Although the successful flow of information is not automatic and often requires a manager’s commitment, if not intervention, it happens every day in organizational life, often in the most mundane ways. This principle recognizes that the effort to withhold information from the public has become an all-but-impossible task today because of the emergence of electronic technology that facilitates sunlight, and the rise, over the last decade, of the blogosphere, Twitter, YouTube and face book which make transparency all but inevitable and require managers to choose transparency and to find ways to authenticate status as needed and on-line information.

In the final analysis, strategic management in a networked world requires that managers and agencies acknowledge that work today is performed by networks of workgroups within and outside the organization. The ability to sense and respond and manage, gather and share knowledge and data, and respond to changing circumstances require managers to focus on creating, cultivating and ultimately institutionalizing their own and the organization’s ability to sense, respond, share with candor and learn.

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There is no right answer for how an agency should embark on this process. However, from my experience, a few considerations may be worthwhile discussing and agreeing upon in a team meeting.

• First, introduce the idea by defining the agency’s core policies and mission and how this process is aligned with them. Introduce capabilities business unit by business unit not principle by principle and program in the active transfer of lessons learned across business units.

• Second, pick a business unit that needs or wants to change.

• Third, start at or near the top of the organization so that leaders identify with, strategically embrace and empower what will happen.

• Fourth, build a master plan even if it is on a small scale or is incremental in nature so that progress can be clearly tracked. The master plan should, if at all possible, include a “no secrets” policy as worthwhile for as well as a commitment to openness and free flow of information.

• Fifth, introduce the principles in waves and not all at one time.

• Sixth, start with internal ends to be achieved before going to community or broad stakeholder interface.

• Seventh, look for incentives to participate even if they are informal or depart- ment-unit specific.

• And finally, for the foreseeable future, let the results speak for themselves.

If progress is not made, then acknowledge up front that the process needs to be changed, restructured or even abandoned. By doing so, the agency can change the way it learns, promote knowledge sharing, discovery and dissemination as well as how collaborating among networks produces win-win outcomes for everyone involved.

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