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Excellence in Public Service

Agency Report: the San Francisco AIDS Foundation

Increasingly, public sector work means the blurring of lines between government, private sector, and non-profit organizations. "The changing profile of the profession has meant that public service no longer refers exclusively to tasks performed by government; it now involves work with not-for-profit and private firms as well" (Bowman, et al., 2004: p. 6). Accordingly, I wanted to know if the theories of "excellence in government" published by the International City Management Association could be applied to non-profit service-based organizations.

For the purpose of this discussion, I interviewed Jeannette Peralta, the Human Resources Director of The San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF) on November 14, 2005. This paper will examine some of the substantive criteria of excellent governments discussed in the Denhardt text in the context of The San Francisco AIDS Foundation (SFAF): namely action orientation, employee orientation and autonomy and entrepreneurship.

Action Orientation

The International City Management Association (ICMA) defines *action orientation* as the ability of governments to "identify problems and deal with them quickly, fighting through structural political, legal and environmental constraints that make action more difficult than in the private sector. (Denhardt, 2006: p. 183). As HR Director, I believe Peralta embodies this criterion. During her tenure at SFAF, for example, she has identified the organizations weaknesses in areas like classification & compensation, and recruiting.

SFAF has a two-tiered classification and compensation structure that Peralta feels is old and dysfunctional. They have A-B-C classifications and numerical classifications with pay-grades

similar to the General Schedule. Peralta is working with a consultant on the process of integrating these two classification structures to come up with low-, mid- and high-range salaries for each classification.

In 2004, The LifeCycle Event, one of SFAF's main programs, generated record revenue. Bolstered by more private donations, in 2005 the organization was able to add 9 new positions, in addition to 4 others that needed to be staffed. Unprepared for the challenge of staffing 13 positions while fulfilling her other duties as HR Director, Peralta needed help. She went to the Director and requested permission to hire a dedicated recruiter. Understanding that recruitment is a priority in any organization, and that the HR department was having trouble being timely and responsive to all personnel needs and issues, the Director of SFAF instructed the finance department to budget a part-time recruiter for Peralta.

Employee Orientation

In my opinion, public sector employees are better able to provide the services of their organization to the citizenry if they are able to treat their clients with respect for their humanity. This starts with the organization treating its employees in the same manner. The ICMA calls this function of excellence having an *employee orientation*. SFAF demonstrates its commitment to this type of excellence by having, among other things, human resources policies that strike a balance between work and private life. "The culture here is very open and compassionate to family needs and personal needs," said Peralta, "[if an employee is absent] it's not like 'you weren't here. Why weren't you here?' This organization just doesn't work that way."

Indeed, SFAF offers its employees a month of paid time off their first year of employment. When possible, and job duties permitting, employees are allowed to telework from outside the office. There is departmental flexibility in start and finish times. SFAF offers part-time employment

for certain staff, such as the new recruiter Peralta was able to hire in 2005 in response to the staffing crisis I have previously discussed.

Employees are eligible for paid Family Leave after 625 hours of employment, while the Family Medical Leave Act states eligibility at 1,250 hours. If an employee has not met the 625 hour minimum, and the leave is for their own illness, SFAF will pay their short-term disability. The compassion exhibited toward employees of SFAF makes it the sort of organization for which I would love to work.

Autonomy, Entrepreneurship and the Learning Organization

Developing a culture “conducive to conceiving ideas and doing new things to solve problems” (Denhardt, 2006: p. 184) fosters a climate of personal responsibility and ownership. The ICMA calls this mark of excellence *autonomy and entrepreneurship*. Not only do excellent agencies foster this environment, but they have a proven record of implementing creative solutions to problems, even when resources are scarce. (Denhardt, 2006). SFAF’s dedication to this category of excellence is apparent in their approach to staff training and development.

When asked about training and development programs for SFAF employees, Peralta said, “We work with a system called the Learning Organization, developed by a gentleman named Peter Senge.” Senge suggests that five elements contribute to building a learning organization. Personal mastery is defined as the connecting of individual learning, skills and growth to organizational learning.

Mental models link an individual’s world view with learning and innovation. A shared vision transforms an idea into a belief shared throughout the organization. Team learning is the “process of aligning and developing the capacities of a team to create the results its members truly desire” (Senge, 1990: p. 236). Finally, Senge talks about systems thinking, which allows us to understand

how recognizing the interconnectedness of our actions and our consequences affects the organization's goals and culture. (Senge, 1990).

For SFAF, according to Peralta, the application of Senge's model has had positive results throughout the organization. Meetings are more productive. Communication is healthier. Different opinions and out-of-the-box thinking are afforded more esteem. Respect between employees, and between management and labor has improved. Decision making skills have been enhanced: SFAF employees have learned how to stand their ground, while at the same time have the ability to ask themselves if they can live with a particular decision, and examine why they feel so strongly one way or the other.

Conclusion

According to Bowman, public service is "the people establishment" that provides services to the public and advocates the public good. The modern definition of public service encompasses all public sector organizations, government agencies and non-profits alike, as well as those from the private sector who have contractual obligations with these agencies. "While the locus and composition of public service have changed, the primary purpose continues to be the improvement of civic well-being" (Bowman, et al., 2004; pp. 7-8). The San Francisco AIDS Foundation's mission statement, to stop the AIDS pandemic and end the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS makes it apparent that the organization takes the idea of improving civic well being quite seriously.

With SFAF commitments to action orientation, employee orientation, and autonomy and entrepreneurship as an example, it is clear to me that non-profit organizations can be held to the exacting standards of excellence in government advocated by the International City Management Association. Moreover, as public service providers, it is my opinion that not only can non-profits be held to these high standards, but they must: excellence in public service demands it.

References

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