

Public Land Management Skills for the 21st Century

Rick Smith

*U.S. National Park Service
Southwest Regional Office
Santa Fe, New Mexico*

It is common to discuss the dawning of a new century in terms of change. Already in the last decade of the 20th century, we can begin to sense the magnitude of this change. Computers are revolutionizing the communications process. The world order that has existed since the end of World War II is crumbling. We debate the drastic predictions of the environmental consequences of how the nations of the world treat the earth's resources. Often it appears that the only constant of the 21st century will be change.

We can fully expect that this tidal wave of change will sweep over our profession of public land management. Some of the changes are already apparent. The public, for in-

stance, is demanding a larger role in public land management decision-making. People are no longer willing to leave decisions solely to the professionals. Agency mission statements are being modified under pressure from public land advocacy groups, many of which are increasingly critical of the consumptive uses of public resources. Agencies must subject their proposed actions to strict cultural and environmental compliance procedures that are likely to become even more strict in the future. Many of these procedures place the agencies in the difficult position of deciding between the preservation of a natural community and the continuation of a way of life that has sustained groups of people for years.

If, then, our agencies will face adapting to wholesale change in the future, we will need a new breed of employee, one that is equipped to meet the certain challenges that will accompany this change. The critical task for present-day public land managers is to be able to identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities that these new employees will need. We can then design agency training programs to train, or, in some cases, retrain our current employees and begin to work with academic institutions to assure that future graduates of professional programs receive the appropriate preparation for subsequent work in the field.

I have tried to place the following list of knowledge, skills, and abilities into priority order, with the most important being first. I freely admit that I am not sure that we can teach some of these skills in an academic or agency-training environment. In some of cases, what may be necessary is a change in the bureaucratic environment in which our employees work if the specific ability is to

take root and flourish. I only know that if our employees do not possess these skills and abilities, they are not going to cope with the challenges confronting our agencies.

DEALING WITH RAPID CHANGE

I believe the most important skill for future employees will be the *ability to tolerate ambiguity*. The process of change implies the replacement of one set of land management realities with another. Until the new reality, complete with policies, procedures, programs, and the like, is in place, there will be few absolutes upon which an employee can depend. They must be able to see the shades of grey that will dominate the land management landscape instead of the blacks and whites. They must be ready to respond to new situations with creative, innovative decisions that will not come from handbooks, guidelines, or policies. In an era of change, such instruments will be hopelessly out-of-date before they are even published.

An example is the rapidly evolving environmental consciousness that is a factor in the American political scene. I cannot think of a single land managing agency whose policies and guidelines are proactive in relation to this change. While the agencies struggle to catch up, our employees face an era of rapid environmental change. Often, our own employees are forcing changes in the agencies. A dissident group of U.S. Forest Service employees in the Northwest are challenging the timber practices of the bureau. The Association of National Park Rangers has challenged the personnel and administrative practices of the U.S. National Park Service, questioning whether these

practices are appropriate in an era of rapid environmental change. In both cases, the groups have developed positions which have taken root in a bureaucratic vacuum in which old policies and practices simply do not work very well.

In concert with tolerating ambiguity must come the *ability to manage change*, not to be overwhelmed or engulfed by it. Our employees will need to see change as an opportunity to be seized, not a problem to be overcome. In my own agency, I see instance after instance of program managers literally stopped in their tracks by changing conditions. The most common reaction to change is to deny that it is happening. This attitude is a certain prescription for failure. The second most common is to be angry about the change, to worry about how it is going to affect them personally. This reaction will stifle the flexibility and creativity that they will have to bring to bear upon the issues that arise because of change. It is difficult to be innovative when one is angry.

Managing change often means taking risks. That is the third attribute that our employees will need. To be successful in a time of change does not mean doing things the way they always have been done. Taking risks is scary, but employees can reduce the chances for disaster considerably if they carefully analyze the pluses and minuses of a risky decision before they make the decision. Failure to do so converts the risk decision into a kamikaze run. Without careful analysis, the agency must improvise its responses to public comment. Such improvisation will often cause more problems than it purports to resolve.

Taking risks implies a highly refined *ability to set priorities and com-*

municate these priorities to the other agency employees and to the diverse groups with whom the agency deals. Setting priorities is a skill, not a God-given gift. Our employees can learn to do it better than most of them do now. It requires that they spend their time only on those programs and projects that most fully accomplish agency goals and objectives. Too often, though, the goals and objectives are so poorly articulated that our people cannot set priorities. They simply do not know what is most important. Without clearly defined and mutually agreed-upon goals and objectives, it is impossible to mobilize the efforts of people to accomplish tasks.

LIVING WITH CONTROVERSY & POLITICS

Once the goals and objectives are defined and the priorities set, our employees must be able to communicate them. Yet most of them are such poor communicators that they can never tell anyone what the plans are. In the future, when our actions will be subjected to ever more public scrutiny, the ability to communicate ideas, to build public consensus for proposed actions, will be vital for agency success.

Discussing issues in public is sure to generate controversy as public land managers face a growing number of constituent groups competing for public resources and making more demands on our agencies for what these groups consider to be their share of the resources. Our new breed of employee is going to have to *be comfortable with controversy*, recognizing that conflict resolution will demand another skill, that of negotiation. Employees will have to negotiate with a wide variety of peo-

ple and groups, many of whom will have diametrically opposite objectives during the negotiating sessions. All of the skills of negotiation—when to compromise and when to stand firm, setting up win-win situations, sizing up areas of potential agreement—are the abilities our employees will have to possess in the future.

To complement this negotiating skill, our employees will have to possess a sophisticated *understanding of the political process*. The interest groups with whom our agencies deal have become far more adept at using the political process to try to influence agency decisions. Our employees will have to develop similar skills. Many current land managers have argued that we should try to remain above politics, believing that our missions are too important to discuss in the political arena. If, however, we accept the fact that politics are neither evil nor good but simply the way things get done in our system, then staying above politics will be the worst possible decision. It will guarantee that we will be outside the decision-making circle. Our employees must recognize that what we cannot afford is to become involved in partisan politics. This should not prevent them, though, from being skilled observers of, and effective participants in, the political process.

DIVERSITY: THE NEW REALITY

Dealing with the variety of interest groups will require another skill from our folks, that of *recognizing, valuing, and dealing with cultural diversity*. The racial, cultural, and ethnic make-up of the users of public lands is rapidly changing. No longer can we assume that these users will primarily be white and come to areas in traditional nuclear families. Not

only will the users represent the diverse mix of American society, but also they will come in single-parent or extended families. More of them will be older and will arrive in non-traditional forms of transportation. Many more will not speak English as their first or second languages. Disabled people will represent a larger percentage of users. All this means that our employees will have to be more sensitive to this kind of diversity.

This sensitivity, of course, will have to be applied to our work force also. The U.S. Forest Service estimates that approximately 50% of the people who will be employed by the bureau in 2000 do not currently work for the USFS. Other land managing agencies have lower estimates, but all are in the 35-40% range. The question is, Who will these new employees be? One fact is sure. If agencies wish to remain competitive for top quality in a shrinking labor pool, these new employees will not be predominantly white males as they almost always have been. Eighty percent of the entries into the labor pool in the next ten years will be women, minorities, or immigrants. Our workforce will surely reflect this fact. This means that our current crop of front-line supervisors will face managing a workforce that will be fundamentally different than it now is. They will have to be much more sophisticated in dealing with cultural, racial, and gender differences. They are going to have to push our agencies into adopting flexible programs that will allow us to retain these new employees after we have made the substantial training investment that we make in our employees' first few years of service. That is going to mean the implementation of programs such as job shar-

ing, dual careers, language training, child care, flex-time scheduling, cross-cultural training, and a host of innovative other ways of scheduling and accomplishing work. Our employees are our most visible symbol of our agencies' commitment to equality of opportunity for our employees and to equal provision of services to our user groups.

THE ENDS, NOT THE MEANS

Our employees will have to *focus increasingly on results, rather than on process*. One of the fundamental flaws of every bureaucracy is its fixation on process. Whenever an agency completes a management review of one of its components, the review team invariably focuses on process: are all the required plans in place, are administrative controls adequate, have the required number of public meetings been held, have equal opportunity goals been met, etc. In almost no instance with which I am familiar, is the real questions asked: Is this unit, park, forest, or preserve better managed because of these efforts? Are resources better cared for? Are user groups better served? Even if the so-called peace dividend becomes a reality in the 21st century, I know of no one who truly believes that the dividend will provide the amount of money necessary to accomplish all that needs to be done in public land management. We are going to have to find employees who are willing to concentrate on what we might call the bottom line, to focus their attention, energy, and resources on the agency's core mission. We will not have the luxury of continuing to deal with process.

This focus on results is one of the assumed products of strategic planning, a process that allows an agency

to assess its ability to cope with predicted changes in its area of jurisdiction. Almost every land management agency has its version of what my agency calls its 21st century task force. The Director of the U.S. National Park Service charged members of his task force with analyzing the environment in which the USNPS would operate in the next century. Once they had completed this analysis, the task force was to assess the agency's ability to meet the challenges that would arise from this predicted future.

Although its members were carefully selected, the task force found the analysis and assessment extremely difficult. Very few members had the required analytical skills to chart the future environment of the USNPS and to assess what changes would be necessary if the agency were to operate successfully within it. Our future employees, in addition to possessing technical skills, must have *the ability to analyze complex issues and develop plans for their resolution*. In the past, agencies have devoted their recruitment strategies to either finding highly skilled technicians or fulfilling affirmative action goals. While neither course of action is wrong, and the latter is certainly an important factor in developing diversity within our workforces, it is clear that we are going to have to add some thinkers to our ranks.

ARE PUBLIC LANDS BECOMING IRRELEVANT?

Adding these kinds of people is absolutely critical, since land management agencies face some threat of becoming irrelevant in the 21st century. It is common to argue that public lands will become all the more important in the future since we live

in a society that is rapidly closing in on its remaining open spaces. There are several holes, however, in this optimistic view of our future importance. The first is demographics. By 2000, an overwhelming percentage of Americans will live in urban areas. More of these people will be non-white, older, living in non-nuclear families, and be heavily involved in the issues of urban America. None of these groups is a particularly heavy user of public lands. The second is economics. To rebuild the infrastructures of the urban areas is going to require a massive capital investment in roads, sewers, waste management facilities, and similar public works projects. Spending on public land issues could be seen as a luxury that the nation cannot afford. We will need our best thinkers to develop strategies for plans and programs that will assure that our agencies remain relevant in the future.

If land management agencies are successful in finding employees with the skills and abilities I have listed, agency leaders will have to create an environment in which these employees can fully use their talents. For many agencies, this is going to represent fundamental changes. Bureaucracies tend to stifle creativity. Rigid lines of authority hamper delegation. Concentrating decision-making power in the hands of a few discourages risk-taking. Guidelines, policies, and manuals substitute for independent thought. Agencies will have to develop a vision for the future that stimulates their employees and must create an atmosphere in the workplace that permits employees to work together to achieve the elements of the vision. Even the brightest and best will fail if these conditions do not exist.