

The National Park Service Restructuring:

A Perspective

This writer has always believed himself an agent of change—a reformer in and of the National Park Service—not because the NPS is bad, but because its potential is so great, and because the United States and the world so desperately need a National Park Service at the peak of its potential. After trying every means from guidelines, policy, and dicta from Directors and Secretaries of the Interior to statutory requirements, it finally became clear that the way to influence the NPS is to influence the values of the 18,000 or so individuals who are the NPS. The people of the NPS will resist to the death a requirement to do something in which they do not believe, but will die trying to do that which they believe right and necessary. Central among the many elements of the institutional culture of this organization is the confluence of thousands of individually held values. The 1995 restructuring of the National Park Service will ultimately succeed because of that fundamental truth.

Restructuring came about when the agency was confronted with a problem so difficult it seemed impossible of solution without fundamental change. The problem was to achieve the employee reductions required by a joint presidential-congressional agreement to take 280,000 employees out of the federal work force. The NPS share of this reduction was announced to be 1,380 full-time equivalents (FTEs) in a first round, with a similar reduction to follow later. In a bureau already seriously understaffed for its 80 million acres, 240 million visitors, tens of thousands of miles of roads and other infrastructure, and uncounted millions of natural and cultural resources, the decision was made to insulate the parks, insofar as possible, from the effects of the reductions.

The cuts would come from central offices.

The 1991 Vail Conference, on the 75th anniversary of the NPS, had surfaced widespread and deep discontent among the people of the agency. More than a hundred steps were identified to rectify problems real and perceived. Decisive action could easily have accomplished most of these steps within three or four years. Instead, implementation floundered—clumsy and directionless—for lack of a driving vision.

Frustrated and uncertain about where the fault lay, the working groups assembled from the field in 1994 to plan for the drastic FTE reductions seized the opportunity to make drastic changes. Goals, not all openly acknowledged in the restructuring plan, included the following:

- Changing in the Executive Corps of the NPS (basically the Regional Directors and the Associate Directors).
- Eliminating the command-and-control management systems exercised principally by Regional Directors and park Superintendents.
- Differentiating between leadership and management, and focusing Executive-level employees upon leadership.
- Creating open and participatory management systems that derive quality assurance from peer pressure.
- Creating a more “horizontal” management structure, with lower overhead and broader and weaker spans of control for supervisors.
- Eliminating the apparent direction of park managers by central-office professionals in the name of helping the managers.
- Eliminating park-vs.-park and Region-vs.-Region competition for dollars, FTEs, and influence.
- Creating interdependent cooperation among parks, Regions, and other entities.
- Creating new opportunities for potential leaders to develop and demonstrate their aptitudes.

Several changes in organizational jargon were adopted to provide symbolic reinforcement to the goals. These propagandistic changes, predictably, have proven cumbersome. “Cluster” is generally accepted and

understood, but is at best an unpoetic term subject to derision. “Field Area”—habitually applied informally to parks—now begins with capital letters and substitutes approximately for the banished term “Region.” Central-office professionals, presumably as penance for past excesses, must now explain to incredulous citizens that they work in a “National Program Center”—or, worse, a “Systems Support Office” (SO). “Program Leaders” subordinate to “Team Coordinators” requires explanation from time to time.

Underscoring the folly of changing an organization by changing its nomenclature, a panel of the individuals who developed the restructuring plan, meeting earlier this year with Cluster and Systems Support Office leaders, repeatedly used traditional but defunct terminology rather than the newspeak of their own invention. But let us not ourselves descend into superficiality by attacking the restructuring for its superficialities. What, after a year, have the substantive changes meant?

Enormous changes have occurred in the Executive Corps of the Service. The “Directorate”—previously made up of the Director, the Deputy Director, seven Associate Directors, and 10 Regional Directors—has been reduced by 26%. It is now the National Leadership Council, consisting of the Director, the Deputy Director, five Associate Directors, and seven Field Directors. The duty stations or incumbents of all but three of the previous 19-member Directorate have

changed, and the nature of the duties for all except the Director and Deputy have changed fundamentally. Several reassignments, including the one that directly affected this writer, have brought capable talent and new energy to the top. A few, inevitably, have not matched duties with capabilities, but a more comprehensive change in leadership could hardly be imagined.

Command-and-control management is as dead as it ought to be if chaos is to be avoided. It will always be necessary for the field to respond promptly and according to the "party line" to certain requests from headquarters, but such requests are less frequent than before. Field Directors, with their limited staffs, have no choice but to limit either command or control to the most important matters. As intended, this has forced Field Directors to eschew the details of "management" and to address themselves to the broader domain of "leadership." The best Field Directors are encouraging empowered experimentation within certain broad but necessary directions and limits. Unfortunately, sweeping reform seems always to reveal a few at high levels who relish change but lack vision of what is to be built. This destructive minority even today answers every question from subordinates with "You tell me!", avoiding the details of management but abdicating the responsibility of leadership. Among central offices, some of the National Program Centers carved from the former Washington Office

appear to have had the greatest difficulty with the new concepts. And beyond a few training courses, the mechanism developed to implement the restructuring does not reach into individual parks. As a result, some Superintendents are actively promoting the new concepts with their staffs while others have changed not at all.

The goal for a more "horizontal" organizational structure was adopted in response to the broader Administration program for "reinventing government." It reflects business management philosophy of the eighties and nineties, and goes hand-in-hand with several of the other goals. In the central offices of the Intermountain Field Area, at least, it has been achieved, but this appears not to be the case in every Field Area.

The other goals are for the most part being achieved as a result of the transfer of Regional power to the Clusters. To put things in plainest words, prior to the restructuring, 34 park Superintendents worked for me and now I work for them. They are not my line superiors, but my success depends upon their satisfaction. Neither I nor any of my subordinates can direct a park Superintendent, formally or in the name of rendering service. There are, of course, occasions on which my subordinates and I disagree with park Superintendents in significant ways. Although daunting at first, every such disagreement thus far has been satisfactorily resolved through collegial discussion with the other parties.

The most important factor is the

Cluster, however, and one hopes they are all like the Southwest Cluster. Historically never dominated by one or two Superintendents of big parks with big budgets, independent political support, and a habit of receiving deference, Southwest parks found interdependent cooperation natural. Rookie Superintendents, parks newly transferred from the former Western Region, small parks, and lesser-known parks have all been prominent in the Cluster Leadership Committee (called Advocates in the Southwest to reflect their duties to all parks in the Cluster). The two individuals who have served as Cluster Chair have both worked to elicit consensus among their colleagues without advantage to the interests of their own parks or their friends. With all business conducted in the open, it is impossible for any member to forget or ignore his or her obligations to every other member. Cluster meetings have been forthright and lively, but factionalism has yet to rear its ugly head.

With great care, Clusters have begun to sanction "advisory groups" of specialists in fields such as administration, facilities management, and resource management. These groups promote communication among professional peers and render specialized advice to their Clusters. It is noteworthy that the proposed groups that have been denied sanction were those that appeared to be attempting to define power bases or areas of "turf" for themselves contrary to the spirit of the restructuring.

In some cases, "self-directed work groups" have developed to address matters not ideally suited for Cluster action. "Vanishing Treasures" is a group of 38 parks in two Clusters that grew from an initial four parks calling attention to difficulties in preserving historic and prehistoric ruins in the arid West. A somewhat similar group has evolved to provide coordination and a reasonable degree of consistency in American Indian Trust Responsibility and compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in all three clusters of the Intermountain Field Area. Mindful of the fact that authority resides in the Clusters, these groups have nonetheless performed useful and independent work.

Serious concern has been expressed about Superintendents having full authority to approve certain documents without the quality assurance reviews and approvals previously performed by Regional Offices. The Intermountain Field Director has given a simple order that such approvals must include a peer review. The SO has offered to work with Southwest Superintendents to develop processes for peer reviews. Each Superintendent who is preparing an General Management Plan, for example, will devise his or her own peer review process. The Southwest SO will watch, usually participate as a "peer" chosen by the Superintendent, monitor the successes and problems of the various approaches, and share the information with the Cluster. Thus far, no Superintendent has

done other than to seek broad, well-informed, professional participation in their peer reviews. Should one take the opposite approach—seeking to limit comment to those known in advance to agree with their perspectives—they would almost certainly be thwarted by the public visibility of the process.

The trickiest subject, of course, is dividing up money and FTEs among the various parks and central offices. The first year's experience has seen a few protracted disagreements and isolated instances of suspicion. These have been handled very effectively by asking all parties to consider the situations from the perspective of the Field Area as a whole. Much credit is due to the impeccable demeanor of the Deputy Field Directors who, although each is assigned responsibility for a specific Cluster, have consistently focused attention of all parties upon every park and Cluster in the Field Area rather than upon narrower interests. Even more important is the maintenance of an awareness that in most cases the organization is not "dividing money" but rather prioritizing proposed projects according to known criteria—a situation in which peer pressure and open processes bring out the best in people.

One of the most successful aspects of the restructuring has been in the area of leadership opportunity. The almost complete makeover of the Executive Corps has created upward mobility to fill behind those who moved into Executive ranks. And the dispersal of the work of the previous

Executive Corps to numerous Cluster Leadership Committees, advisory groups, self-directed work groups, and special committees has drawn attention to the leadership qualities of many who had previously gone unnoticed. Interdependence has also come easier than many anticipated among central offices as well as among parks. By mutual agreement among the Intermountain SOs, one SO handles concessions management for all three clusters. Another handles aircraft management for all three. Two SOs with National Register Program capabilities provide services to the third Cluster, which is not staffed for that function. In these and many other program areas, the SOs and the Clusters make best advantage of one another's strengths and compensate for one another's weaknesses. This is not yet the case servicewide. In at least one Field Area, three seriously understaffed SOs are organized equally, identically, and separately.

This observer would prognosticate that within the near future the National Park Service will apply a critical review to the restructuring. Obvious problems such as the one noted just above will be corrected. Nomenclature will return to terms that require less effort to remember, do not bear such obvious stamps of bureaucracy, and are easier for the public to understand.

The basic elements of the restructuring—dispersed power, open and participatory processes, leadership opportunity, and peer pressure on behalf of quality—will continue.

Better than any management system we have had in the past, these elements tap into the confluence of

thousands of individually held values that are the core of the National Park Service and the secret to its success.



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