

NPS and the \$300,000 Privy: A Parable for Management

During the fall of 1997, the first headline about the new outhouse at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area hit the streets. The message to the reading public? Park Service Builds Gold-Plated Privy. This was followed by a cascade of similar stories from around the nation. ("Outhouse Outrage," *The Washington Times*, 17 October; "Congrats, taxpayers, on your \$333,000 outhouse," *USA Today* editorial, 14 October; "Flush with Money," *Newsweek*, 9 October; "Primo Privy," *U.S. News & World Report*, 20 October). Two months later the venue changed to Glacier National Park with more headlines in the vein of "High-priced Privies" (*USA Today*, 15 December). The new NPS director responded to the ensuing public outrage with a communication committing to personally review and approve every construction line-item for new facilities. On its face, this would seem to reflect a progressive, take-charge response to a relatively small problem: after all, the projects at issue together cost only \$1.3 million out of a construction budget for that year alone of \$109 million, and, in the instance at Glacier, reflected a direct congressional request. Is the case closed? From an outsider's perspective, unfortunately for the NPS, the answer is "no." The case of the Delaware Water Gap and Glacier privies underscores the price management can pay for ignoring a central factor in business decision-making: public opinion.

The problems that underlie the decisions as Delaware Water Gap and Glacier have little to do with good management. In the first case, the privy was designed to local standards, used environmentally sensitive materials, reflected the culture and feel of the park, and relied on life-cycle costing in an attempt to minimize the cost of maintaining the structure in years to come. In the second case, all of the above was true, and the

project was built at the specific direction of a member of the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee and had the support of both Montana senators. Total cover from a basic management perspective. The problem is that public perception was left out of the equation in both cases, and, in the end, NPS was not covered at all, but totally exposed. Compounding this exposure is a variety of hints floated by the Park

Service that a few more such projects might emerge because they were too far under construction to stop or substantially change.

Public relations professionals say if you have bad news, get it out, get it all out, and get it out in a hurry. Limit the press exposure to a few news days and move on. Hints that there may be more projects coming out only guarantees that the Park Service's exposure will remain long after park management announced that new cost-control systems are in place. Instead of getting all of the bad news out and moving on, the bad news will trickle out slowly enough so that the story will repeat itself several times and in a variety of new outlets. More taxpayers will hear that the National Park Service is wasting tax dollars on million-dollar toilets and \$700 bags of grass seed while at the same time NPS complains about a steadily growing multi-billion-dollar backlog of so-called needs. And in the public mind, the issue changes from anger at a few isolated incidents of waste to a new and far more corrosive skepticism that the Park Service cannot be trusted to spend taxpayer money on the kind of infrastructure problems visitors see every day.

This conversion from isolated anger to corrosive skepticism was reflected by House appropriators when the NPS director was called on to explain the Delaware Water Gap privy on October 29, 1997. Criticisms and words of disbelief were passed from member to member, fi-

nally getting to Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston, whose expression of disappointment also included a promise that this incident will be a factor when considering next year's budget request. While a layperson may take the chairman's remarks as soft criticism, on Capitol Hill it translates to an outright threat from the man who holds the NPS purse strings in his hands.

It may be too late to contain the damage from the Delaware Water Gap and Glacier privies, especially if more examples emerge. The government waste angle has been covered by the ABC, NBC, and CBS television networks, both in evening news coverage and in news magazines. If more examples emerge, they will return to the story with retrospectives showing that NPS has learned little from its earlier problems. Fair or not, this is the perspective the American public will most likely be presented with. While the Park Service may be forced once again to focus on damage control, a better long-term solution may be to focus on changing the culture of line management to include a new, subjective management tool: public perception. Adding this tool can begin by educating line managers to ask themselves a series of questions: (1) Can I explain the costs to my satisfaction? (2) Can I explain the costs in terminology and using concepts the lay public understands? (3) Can I explain the costs to a friend outside of the federal government without gen-

erating skepticism? If the answer to any one of these questions is "no," re-evaluate the project. Danger—especially the danger of public and congressional outrage—may lie ahead.

Public perception is subjective, over-simplified, occasionally based on erroneous assumptions, and tends to change over time. It is not the kind of measurable, objective tool that business schools teach. Nonetheless, in a climate where press outlets feed a public response to exposés and Congress responds to both, positive public perception may prove equally or more valuable than standard precepts of objective, good project management.

Using public perception as a tool for measuring management decisions stands in apparent conflict with a number of the standards that were used to complete the Delaware Water Gap project. Life-cycle costing, use of environmentally sensitive materials, use of contextually appropriate architectural design, use of native grasses and planting—all of these add up to what should have been a model project. Except that the project is not perceived as a success, but as an example of government waste.

The conflict is more apparent than it is real. The case of the Delaware Water Gap privy shows some objective problems of over-design and excessive project supervision. Still, even without these excesses, the project would have cost \$200,000 or more. Is it possible that the American public simply is not ready for a primitive rest

room with this price tag, no matter the cost of maintaining a similar, less-expensive structure over 25 years? If rejected in the case of Delaware Water Gap and Glacier, does this mean that the public is unprepared for life-cycle costing, sustainable design, and other progressive building principles when applied to other types of structures?

A real problem facing all government agencies is that the public's familiarity with construction costs is limited to the cost of residential construction and home improvements. What the public understands even less is that the per-item costs for a small-scale project, such as a privy, can cost more than a large-scale project. Further, most people do not know what sustainable design is, while some who do know view it negatively as a fringe eco-philosophy. Given this, testing public acceptability of a project's costs, especially those of a small project, only makes sense.

At stake here is not only the agency's policy of implementing sustainable design and building practices, but the credibility of the National Park Service. The potential for further congressional micromanagement of NPS construction projects, an area where Congress has already proven itself meddlesome, could lead to pressure to abandon or greatly curtail this policy. While sating public anger over a few relatively small projects, the overall effect would be unfortunate not only for the Park

Service, which has sought to be a leader in this area, but for the very resources of parks and their long-term protection.

Gauging public opinion, when not required by environmental review, does not have to be an exhaustive, expensive, or even a formal exercise. Park managers have access to any number of groups—advisory councils, friends groups, civic groups—or members within these groups that can serve as indicators of public receptivity or skepticism. Indeed, these groups or individuals within them are often a park manager's toughest critics.

Retaining broad public support for NPS projects goes beyond just reading an often-fickle litmus test of public opinion. If NPS believes that sustainable construction practices are of value, then it has to embark on a continuous education campaign, both at the national level and at the park level. The policy of sustainable practices is not an obvious part of the NPS's mission, and is impossible to explain in the midst of hostile press coverage or congressional hearings. The Park Service has to change public perception if it doesn't want negative reaction to force it to undercut its ability to carry out its legitimate stewardship responsibilities. At the national level, NPS needs to make explicit to a broader audience the goals of its sustainable practices policy and the desired outcomes and costs associated with implementing that policy, while at the same time giving evi-

dence of revamping project management practices to reduce overall costs.

At the park level, shaping public opinion before the press exposés begin is a task that line managers will have to include in their project management responsibilities. Even a well-structured press campaign to explain the nature of the project, its design particulars, and associated costs may be worth the effort if it results in there not being a story to expose. Continuous discussions with local constituencies may help to blunt criticism or questioning by national press. The goal of public education is not to justify all construction costs, but to develop a constituency that understands the value of sustainable practices. It is up to the Park Service as an agency and to individual park managers to ensure that all costs are reasonable and justifiable.

There will be times, even after discovering that a project fails the public perception test, that the Park Service will choose to carry out the project because the agency believes that it addresses a critical resource protection or visitor services need. The Park Service should not be a weathervane and manage parks solely according to public opinion. Yet it should be aware, as we have witnessed with Delaware Water Gap and with Glacier, that negative public perception over small projects can have disproportionately large ramifications for the entire agency. What the Park Service has to ask itself is: Are these

projects worth risking the public's anger at what it sees as a breach of public trust? Think twice about it. Managing national parks is difficult

enough. The National Park Service doesn't need to alienate the parks' largest and most supportive constituency—the American public.

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