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THE POLITICS OF THE DUSTY PLAN

by

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INTRODUCTION

Planning for the future in government or in business is seldom a gratifying task. Planners are often frustrated. Perhaps the most debilitating frustration is that plans are written and then simply discarded to lie on a shelf and gather dust. While that plan may be poorly done, too long, weak in quantitative analysis, or overly quantitative, it is often revealing to look at the power relationships between the planner and the Chief Executive Officer and the differences in how the plan and planning process are perceived by the planner and the CEO.

Arnold Brown has argued in his article, "Everywhere Planners are in Pain,"[1] that the single most important determinant of a successful planning endeavor is not budget, method, or equipment, but is just this relationship between the planner and the CEO. In the planning cycle, difficulties arise in this organizational relationship when there exists a difference in views between the planner's perception and the CEO's hope. Brown argues that there must be better lines of communication between the planner and the CEO.

THE POLITICS OF PLANNING

For Brown, the planner can reduce his pain by remembering that "the planner's role is to provide the means whereby the CEO can plan effectively," that is, the *planner as translator*.[2] Most articles in the planning and futures literature present technical strategies for achieving this translation: that is, they argue for the integration of the left and right brain, the use of common sense intuitive forecasts and strategies, for increased information through modeling or novel methodologies such as Delphi or Emerging Issues Analysis.[3] While these may help the planner in writing a better plan—as judged by the elegance of the plan itself—these methods have very little to do with the politics of planning, the implementation of the plan or the organizational self-awareness that can emerge from a participatory planning process. It is often the case that "the Boss loved the plan, but nothing came of it." Planners remain unaware that the objectives of their plans may be ultimately different from those of the CEO or the organization itself.

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Differences in objectives between planners and the CEO are not necessarily idiosyncratic to planners; rather this is part of the politics of the process, part of the structure of organizations. It is this process that I wish to discuss and elaborate. Specifically, I wish to discuss the politics of the "dusty" plan.

For the planner, the plan is an expression of his or her vision. Although it includes ideas and suggestions of line personnel as well as top management, it is still the planner's work. The planner hopes that through the plan his relationship will change from researcher (technician) or implementor to advisor or co-decision-maker. Walter Blass has developed similar categories that describe this relationship. He talks of "planner as frustrated mechanic" and "planner as ever the bridesmaid," and finally "planner as meddler or would be king."

However, just as intellectuals and priests took away power from the monarchy, top executives justifiably fear that planners will take away their power. The planner certainly understands the organization at an operational and philosophical level. The planner also learns about the organization's history through the plan writing process. With this historical understanding, the planner is equipped to develop the organization's alternative futures. Writing of the plan gives power. In industrial culture, the written word is power. Words and language not only define the world, they create the world and give ownership of this creation to the writer. The planner thus can create history and future. This emphasis of the written word is especially true for planners trained in law.

Blass writes that "proximity to the seat of power must be handled with humility and reserve."[4] However, even if this is done, the politics of institutional and organizational relationships will force the CEO to make it clear that he is *the* planner, and the planner simply an articulator of his ideas. This is not an easy realpolitik lesson to accept, nor is the realization that the best way to see one's ideas furthered is to include them gently in conversation so that the CEO thinks that they are his, for such an act acknowledges the vertical structure of organizational power and the planner's lowly place in this structure.

SYMBOLIC POLITICS

Beyond organizational power relationships, the purpose of the plan as perceived by the CEO and the planner may often be quite different. The plan is a symbolic document. This is especially so in governmental agencies. The CEO may simply want to have a document to show to a particular body—the state legislature, or a Federal funding agency—or to stockholders in the private sector, as an illustration that the institution has entered the world of modern management. A plan is symbolic of the effective use of re-

sources. It is a way of saying, "yes, we are doing something about x problem." Agencies use plans to diffuse criticism: that is, "we are working on it." Even in the private sector, where there is a clear motive for operations—profit—and a clear result if targets are not met—loss of marketshare—similar problems exist. Lack of relevance to immediate business problems is an excuse often used for shelving a plan. However, the CEO's intention may have been simply to impress the board of directors. In both sectors, plans and planning are often used to obscure deeper organizational problems.

POST-PLAN DEPRESSION

Thus for the organization, the plan itself, not its content, and especially not its implementation, is often what is important. The planner, however, often sees the plan as an expression of his vision of the institution's future: the plan becomes an extension of himself. From the planner's perspective, the plan is a *vehicle of change,* of organizational revitalization. For the CEO, it may be an expression of prestige. Thus, when the plan is put on the shelf the planner is dismayed and enters "post-plan depression." The CEO, of course, proudly displays the plan on his shelf. Where else should it go? His goal has been accomplished. Praise has been lavished, funds received, criticism diffused, the knighthood of modern management bestowed.

The CEO already has a way to do business, to make decisions, to understand the future. He already has a worldview, a set of priorities, and although he asked for the plan in the first place, it is certainly not because he wants his world restructured, reorganized or reprioritized. He may simply want to decrease the uncertainty of the external socio-economic environment as well as manage various difficult to control internal programs and individuals.

Plans are symbolic. They evoke the future. They embody political motives. The Hawaii Judiciary, for example, has developed a reputation for excellence in planning largely due to its innovative comprehensive planning documents. However, while these are used by court planners all over the USA, the Hawaii Judiciary still has not implemented its plans, nor has it adopted a strategic plan. The purpose of the planning process was, in retrospect, further to unify and centralize the courts and to justify future judicial growth.

Plans are also used within organizations by programs to increase their power or to articulate their vision. However, this too can be problematic. A plan developed for a local YMCA, although accurate, elegant and practical, turned out to be useless. Since the Central YMCA was not interested in examining a plan from a lower level branch, it could not be operationalized at the local level, nor was the larger purpose, of convincing the Central YMCA that the

YMCA's marketshare and prestige as a premiere national and international volunteer association would continue to decline, ever realized. Thus, another dusty plan was added to the garbage heap. Other experiences by colleagues in various state agencies have followed the same pattern. To gain Federal funding or assuage Legislative auditors, a plan is written. Once written, it is shelved.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS

Occasionally, ideas and recommendations from a particular plan are followed through and implemented. But, the language of implementation rarely acknowledges the source of the ideas, nor does it follow the logic of the plan. The planner does not become bride or chief advisor, he or she remains the frustrated technician. However, a plan gathering dust does not mean that the plan failed, or that the planning process is worthless or mere gesturing. Planners must see their work in the overall institutional, organizational sense.

For the planner to avoid post-plan depression, he should understand the politics of the planning process, the motives of the organization and the CEO, and the respective role at the face and symbolic level of the key actors. However, to confront the CEO and argue that he or she wants the plan for purely symbolic reasons will seldom produce the desired results for the planner. The CEO will usually argue—and will believe—that the plan is being written to be implemented. However, his definition of what constitutes implementation may differ from the planner's. In the CEO's view, it is he who solves problems, while the planner's role is to point to future problems to solve.

A WAY OUT?

To begin with, the planner must see the writing of the plan, and the political consensus-building necessary to gain acceptance, as a process of organizational self-learning. The plan then becomes a vehicle for individuals to discover their role—or lack thereof—in the organization or for CEOs to discern what really is going on in the organization. This process, however, sometimes uncovers the organization's dark side—the desire for empire-building among lower level bureaucrats and the desire for organizational growth even when public—citizens' and consumers'—demand does not warrant such growth. Thus CEOs, aware of the chaos and change that might occur when an organization is faced with its dark side, usually attempt to control the planning process by defining planning as the production of a *written plan* of a technical or apolitical nature.

Is there then a way out? Given the politics of organizations, their

vertical power structures and the desire of humans to control others, and to use plans and planning to expand their own egos, probably not. The best the planner can do is understand the politics of who wants what and why on both the conscious personal level and the unconscious institutional level. He could also give up planning and start his own business. Then he would have free rein to impose his vision or ego.

However, if the world of power, wealth, and ego is the central problem, then the planner can attempt to redesign the organization by creating more horizontal participatory structures. Knowing that real people are suffering in bureaucracies or "in hell holes known as institutions"[5]—in the criminal justice or mental health system— he or she could become a political actor, a social activist or lobbyist. The planner then must redefine his or her role, and then convince decision-makers through information, confrontation, debate, and compromise, hoping that the planning process will force organizational and individual self-awareness. If this is not enough, then the planner should work on a global level . . . hitherto unheard of.

As a final alternative, the planner can write the plan, and then, as the plan is shelved, he can in a yogic fashion watch the dust gather and smile. However, if none of these alternatives suffice then it may indeed be wise to switch professions.

NOTES

1. Brown, Arnold, "Everywhere Planners are in Pain," *Long Range Planning*, (Vol. 16, No. 3, 1983), pp. 18-21.

2. Ibid. p. 19.

3. See Fletcher, Geoffrey, "Key Concepts in the Futures Perspective," *World Future Society Bulletin* (January-February, 1979), pp. 25-31.

4. Blass, Walter, "Ten Years of Business Planners," *Long Range Planning*, (Vol. 16, No. 3, 1983), p. 21-24.

5. Yasutomi, Wayne, Development Disabilities Planner. Personal communications sent to the author.