

The Self Renewing Organization

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Connors, Tracy D. (2001). "The Self-Renewing Organization." The nonprofit handbook: Management, Third edition. New York: John Wiley & sons, Inc. (p. 3-45).

Introduction

This is a book chapter that provides the introduction for the study of nonprofit organizations, their management and governance in the present and the future. He discusses the concept of excellence in terms of applying the fundamentals of organizational improvement that do not require extensive training in quantitative analysis and or statistical theory. Rather, it requires a definition of excellence within the functional areas of an organization and a set of basic definitions applied to levels of quality achievement. (p. 4)

Main Ideas

In the latter part of the 19th century, the USA was consumed with the idea of quality management and how it could be attained. Managers and executives sought prescriptions and models that would align them with the quality management thought to be behind Japan's success. This view gave way to the belief that there are three essential components necessary for achieving and sustaining excellence: efficiency, effectiveness and organizational environment.

Quality management by itself is not enough. It must be accompanied by "knowing where we are going, why we are going there and how we plan to get there" (p. 6). Connors says this must be accompanied by constantly improving everything we do and making it safe to change for ourselves and for those to whom we are responsible. Change is the only constant and it will happen whether or not is planned. The effective leader is required to manage and to benefit from it. More importantly the effective leader will seek to initiate change in the organization and not simply react to change when it occurs.

A second component of the self-renewing organization is that it must be aware of where it is in the life cycle. He compares the organization life cycle to the human life cycle as a constant process of birth, death and rebirth, a renewal or regeneration. While strategic planning is important, it is not enough by itself. It must be customer focused and committed to its mission to serving the public purpose for which it was formed. When organizations are synchronized with their operating environment, they are more relevant, aware and fresh. When they are not, they become irrelevant and out of touch.

Connors proposes an excellence equation as the key to sustainability. When organizations are meeting their public purpose by staying within their mission and operating in synchronization with their environment, they achieve the criterion of excellence. Unfortunately this is rare. For an organization to achieve and sustain excellence it must self-renewing and "exploit the dynamic interdependent relationship among effectiveness, efficiency, and environment—the excellence equation" (p. 10).

In order to be effective, self-renewing organizations must know their public service purpose is both valid and viable and shape the delivery of services so that they are customer focused. They use strategic planning to make decisions, allocate resources and manage the organization. Finally, they must achieve tangible business results with their programs and services.

The second part of the equation is efficiency and self-renewing organizations achieve this when they perform well and economically without wasting time, energy and materials. They use process management techniques to improve customer service and information analysis to support the decision making process.

The third part of the excellence equation is to create and sustain a transformational organizational environment in both leadership and utilization of human resources. Connors says that visionary leadership is needed to establish the direction needed to promote high performance and individual development. The leadership must link the human resource focus to development and management practices needed in the self-renewing organization.

Connors provides detailed description of the categories of effectiveness, efficiency and organizational environment. These detailed lists give the nonprofit manager a sense of what is really important in each part of the excellence equation. For example to elaborate on the effectiveness role, he provides a list of characteristics for self-renewing organizations in strategic planning and customer focus and satisfaction. In the efficiency part of the excellence equation, he gives the characteristics of public service providers and process management. The evolutionary organizational environment part of the equation is more fully defined by providing leadership and human resource development and management characteristics.

Implications for Extension Programs

Every county extension office is an organization that is either in a constantly regeneration cycle or in a cycle of decline. It is especially important during this period of budget cuts and fiscal hardships to see county extension as organizations that can benefit from a look at the self-renewing organization equation and checklists provided. County managers start with some list of criteria to see which programs will be saved and which will be cut. The checklists provided in this chapter obviously are not the magic potion that will solve all fiscal problems but they do go a long way to allowing organizations to do a good deal of self assessment and to be prepared when assessment comes from other quarters.

The same view can be taken with organizations that we in extension work with on a daily basis. Are they self-renewing and regenerating or are they in decline? It is easy to get lost in the details of daily minutia and miss the trends and issues that signal change is happening that was not brought about by the organization's leaders but by other external forces. Are we as extension professionals equipped to work with the local organizations to help them adjust to change and to benefit from it? This is a compelling question and it deserves a thoughtful response.

Conclusion

We, in extension, work in a layered organization and with multiple local and regional organizations. Some give us satisfaction and some cause us grief and consternation. By looking at our organizational environment, the efficiency of our organization and its effectiveness, we can begin to see how we might make changes in the direction, albeit perhaps small, of our closest organizational environment. Being

aware of the self-renewing organization equation, we might make a difference in our part of the large multilayered extension hierarchy that functions with a mission, is customer focused and operates with a strategic plan as a guide. We as the human resource part of the organizational environment can affect the other two components of the equation, efficiency and effectiveness.