The Politics of Creating Positive Organizational Change

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Tread carefully when you talk about affecting "people friendly" organizational change, when you advocate a more decentralized approach to accomplishing organizational goals, and when you insist that principle and practicality should go hand in hand. These concepts grace the pages of numerous journals, articles and books. Placing them in the context of the real world, however, is an entirely different story. Just ask Rich Gradel.

When he began his term as Tulsa County chairman for the Republican party, Gradel had to deal with the county committee whose members hadn't met in two years. He also encountered low participation from the precincts within the county; less than half had sent delegates to the last county convention. Since political activity was minimal, no money was being raised, and volunteerism was sparse. The challenge for Gradel was two-fold: 1) to meet the immediate monetary, physical, and political needs of the county party, such as fundraising, establishing a headquarters, and increasing participation; and 2) to implement what he calls "rational populism"; which means that the direction of the party's activities flows from the bottom up (i.e., from the grass-roots level). That being said, what can be learned from Gradel's initial attempts at implementing organizational change?

Doing Something is Always Better than Doing Nothing.
If you want to change the organizational norms, then make changes that support the new norms. Gradel wanted to reinvigorate the party through increased participation and fundraising. One of the first things he did was to reconvene county committee meetings, which hadn't met for two years. Since March of 1999, however, the committee had already met four times. The party had also held fund-raisers and social events designed to involve the party faithful.

Be willing to Admit Mistakes, But Be Discreet.
When he was elected chairman, Gradel inherited debt and an overdue lease payment for the party headquarters. Gradel knew that such a quandary, besides being a terrible way to start, was also an easy way for opponents, both within and without the party, to question the integrity and competence of the party leadership. Therefore, rather than keeping the headquarters and exacerbating the problem, Gradel shut it down, and focused all incoming funds toward paying off the debt owed to the lessor. This move allayed the concerns of the lessor, himself a party supporter, and quickly removed the possibility of further controversy.

Collaboration Is Great, but Leaders Still Have to Lead.
For Gradel's "rational populism" to work, the party must involve volunteers from the grass-roots level in the overall process. In part, this was accomplished by holding meetings, which allowed Gradel to inform precinct leaders of developments within the party and to create an environment in which discussion and creative problem solving can occur. Mr. Gradel has also emphatically stated that neither he nor other party leaders will ever try to force the party volunteers to endorse a particular candidate. Instead, he encourages all of the precinct leaders to begin to look for their own candidates for support for upcoming elections, in the hopes that doing so will allow a better dissemination of ideas and a strengthening of the party's appeal.

On the other hand, Gradel knows what his responsibilities are. He knows that he is largely responsible for fundraising, and for organizing precincts. He knows that it largely falls to him to ensure that the party maintains a positive image within the community, which in part, involves defending Republicans who, after being elected, come under unfair attack from opponents and the media. He also knows that he and the rest of the party leadership are largely responsible for creating a winning electoral strategy for the Republican party. If they don't win, all of the "collaboration" in the world will be meaningless. For this reason, Gradel tends to keep his strategic ideas to himself. It's politics we're talking about after all, where allies can sometimes be your worst enemy.

Gradel will be the first to tell you that his leadership is still a work in progress. More needs to be accomplished, and besides, he and the rest of the party leaders are not even half way through their two-year term of service.

Nonetheless, organizational theorists would do well to learn from his initial efforts. Can "people-friendly" organizational change occur? Gradel would say yes, but he would also say that it must be done with strong leadership--leadership which is willing to make the hard decisions, leadership which knows how to deal with the political intrigue which is part of any organization, and leadership which gives the people a reason to support the common vision.