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by Bruce Courtright

Today's organizations are using the word "excellence" with increasing frequency as they look to the future and describe their goals and visions. Popularized by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman in the hugely successful book *In Search of Excellence*, the term has come to represent a highly desirable state of achievement and well-being in organizations.

The Forest Service is certainly among those organizations seeking excellence in 1984, and is continuing to undergo a self-appraisal in order to determine the best approaches for achieving the excellent state envisioned by its leaders. In this article we wish to share some of the things the Forest Service has done in the past that have made it a strong organization today, and some of the things it envisions for its future.

First, a look to our history. The Forest Service is an organization rich in tradition, imbued throughout the years with pride in professionalism and an ethic of responsiveness to public needs. People who come to work for the Forest Service traditionally have done so out of a genuine interest in the mission of the organization, and this interest is evidenced by quality of performance. Management consultant Kenneth Gold, formerly with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), selected the Forest Service as one of five public sector organizations to study in an analysis of successful organizations that he conducted for OPM's Work force Effectiveness Division with the assistance of Penn State University. In a recent article published in the *Public Administration Review*, Mr. Gold cites the feeling of "specialness" expressed by Forest Service officials as a key to the organization's success and professionalism. He proposes that this special quality comes both from the nature of the organization's mission and the fact that it is "very much a career organization." In other words, employees feel good about the kind of work their organization does, and they usually enter the work force with expectations to stay with the outfit throughout their careers. As Mr. Gold says, "There clearly exists a high esprit de corps, which is punctuated by the fact that the leadership of the agency had traditionally come from within the ranks, and theoretically afforded everyone the opportunity to one day become Chief."

Coming out of this kind of strong tradition and shared values, how is the Forest Service prepared to meet the challenges of the eighties? None would deny that we live in a time of change. While the organizations cited by Peters and Waterman as "excellent" all possess clearly understood and shared organizational values, they also have the capacity to manage change in their value systems in order to deal with a changing environment and changing work demands. They also share a particular set of characteristics that seem to help them survive and indeed flourish throughout changing times.

I decided to use Peters and Waterman's set of eight "excellent" characteristics as a yardstick by which to measure the Forest Service in its own "search for excellence." While I see the eight traits only as a yardstick and not as an infallible prescription for success, I feel that they provide us a valuable tool for making an assessment of our own strengths and weaknesses as we face the future. What follows is a summary assessment of where the Forest Service stands in relation to the eight traits based on written input from a cross-section of agency managers and employees and on the personal observations of the author.

1. A Bias for Action. Peters and Waterman suggest that an attitude of "Do it, fix it, try it" results in high innovativeness in an organization. The Forest Service, with its very decentralized organizational structure, has always rewarded managers that take the right risk, although risk-taking must be balanced against organizational values. Employees and managers would like to see even greater use of this philosophy.

2. Close to the Customer. This trait focuses on reality, service, and reliability, which reflects a way of life for Forest Service employees. Programs such as "Host," which advocates treating Forest visitors as guests, instill a strong, consciousness of customer awareness.

3. Autonomy and Entrepreneurship. This trait describes support for individual initiative and risk-taking. It is seen by many Forest Service managers as an area where we must work harder. Managers are often told to take well-calculated risks, yet we have a heritage of attention to quality and correctness. Frequently, our traditional values conflict with needs to search for new methods and more flexible standards.
4. Productivity through People. The Forest Service works hard to retain its feeling of being a "family" in these times of personnel cuts and emphasis on productivity. A complication the forest Service now faces, however, is the changing composition of its work force. Forest Service employees have traditionally come from very similar backgrounds and educations, but recently our work force is becoming more diverse, increasing the possibilities for value clashes and conflict. Our current "productivity through people" challenge is to maximize use of our diverse strengths and fully integrate all our people into the Forest Service family.

5. Hands on Value Driven. This characteristic includes high involvement by key leaders in decisions regarding core organizational functions and decisions made consistent with known organizational values. I find the Forest Service working hard to maximize involvement of all levels as planning processes become more complex and demanding.

6. Stick to the Knitting. In other words, concentrate on what you're good at. The Forest Service has always been well focused on its core programs.

7. Simple Form Lean Staff. Peters and Waterman suggest that big is not necessarily beautiful at the headquarters level. The Forest Service is critically evaluating ideas to lose any excess "organizational fat," but this is proving to be a challenge. Reducing staff and maintaining positive morale among staff is difficult.

8. Simultaneous Loose-tight Properties. This trait refers to autonomy at the lowest levels, but with core organizational values held central. The Forest Service has fit this model well with unrelenting standards for quality and yet with freedom for both time and line and staff to experiment as long as those standards are met. The organization is currently challenged to weigh the benefits of possible personnel savings through centralizing some functions against these important values.

Overall, the Forest Service has a lot going for it in terms of its strong past and organizational values that support excellence. However, there are definitely some challenges facing the organization as it moves into the future. There are some areas in which its traditional values may actually restrain it from making all the changes needed to fully meet those challenges.

Futurists project a vision of dramatically changing personal values, shifts in population, new conceptions of world and national responsibilities, and a growth of information technology that staggers the imagination. The Forest Service will face changes that will challenge its core values, mission, and strategies in the next 10 years.

Knowing that this reality is at the organizational doorstep led Forest Service Chief Max Peterson to challenge his key line and staff managers to articulate their visions of the future. We felt that this vision, shared by Regional Forester, Zane Smith, is particularly illuminating and probably representative of what most Forest Service key managers would share as their vision of the future.

"VISION OF THE FOREST SERVICE – 1995"

"The Forest Service of 1995, in response to new and greater demands on the resources, dramatic advances in technology and major shifts in population and political strengths is an organization that is "lean and muscular," capable of moving fast, recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities. The organization will be able to periodically and temporarily restructure to allocate critical resources where they will achieve the best results. The organization will have become more decentralized, and less hierarchical, with more of the decisionmaking responsibilities closer to the ground. The Forest Service will retain professional leadership in multiple resource management and technical forestry expertise. Through new technology, the organization will process information much more quickly and efficiently in all directions. This will allow new ways of doing business that result from research being transferred quickly for ground-truthing and once tested, assimilated more quickly into daily business.

"Due to a recognition of Regional diversities, the Regional Forester will serve more as the Chief's Representative guiding the Region and handling important political and information contacts. The Forest Supervisors will assume greater responsibility for consistency between the Forests. There will be less differentiation between the present Research, National Forest Administration, and State and Private activities of the Service. These missions will integrate over time, as will the missions of different agencies now doing similar jobs. The "doing" jobs now accomplished in the Regional Forester's support staff (the Regional Office) will become less distinct as an organizational layer. It will be much smaller and responsible for such tasks as strategic planning (RPA, LMP), Budgeting, Appeals, etc. The core field work force will be based upon the need for continuity and stability. This will necessitate a core work force which may be less mobile. Other more mobile groups of employees will be used, similar to contractors or consultants, for recurring tasks. The work force will be culturally diverse and probably multi-lingual. What are considered minorities by 1983 standards will no longer be considered minorities either in the work force nor in most local communities. These groups will be well represented..."
throughout the organization and well represented in positions of responsibility."

In Zane's vision of the future we see a high correlation of values with those ascribed to the "excellent" companies. To reach this future the Forest Service must embark on a journey that could have many pitfalls. Some innovative steps are now being taken which we feel will chart our course to the future and help remove the roadblocks.

First of all, the management climate at the very top of the organization is supportive of the kinds of values and techniques that will carry us into an "excellent" future.

There is a definite support of new ideas and methods. High value is placed on reducing the costs of doing business while at the same time respecting the organizational heritage of high quality service. "Sacred cows" are open to view and may be challenged from a pragmatic standpoint that meshes the older organizational values of conservation with a willingness to take risk.

When sitting in on a Chief and Staff decision meeting, one is struck by the easy informality based on years of working together in this organization and also by the pragmatic search for solutions to knotty problems. Managerial maturity is evident, yet the challenges of change are also present.

Some of the strategies that the Forest Service is using to insure continued excellence are:

1. A system of Productivity Improvement Teams (PITs) have been commissioned by the Chief. Their objective is to reduce the cost of doing business while at the same time maintaining an acceptable standard of quality. Significant features of the PITs are:
   A. A fast paced orientation meeting for teams which includes training in new methods of systems analysis, strategies for accelerating creativity and contact with key organization members who have insights into assigned problems.
   B. The personal support of the Chief and his willingness to support changes in the standard way of achieving productivity. This is coupled with clear autonomy for the chosen teams and free access to all members of the Forest Service as resources. Recommendations made by the teams over the past 2 years could produce savings of $29,5 million annually if fully implemented.

2. Another strategy for promoting excellence is the shift away from subjective evaluation of line managers to objective measurement based on unit cost trends. The Associate Chief of the Forest Service personally meets with all Field line officers and discusses long-range trends of program costs. These discussions set the framework for the line managers' yearly evaluations and can significantly influence their merit pay. This top level attention on cost concerns is passed down to all layers of the organization.

3. As evidenced by the scenario of the future depicted previously, key organization managers have been encouraged to create and communicate their visions of the future for both their units and the Forest Service as a whole. This is helping provide a keener focus for long-range planning and hopefully will lead to managers doing a more effective job of meeting the needs of the organization and its people.

4. The introduction of new technology may prove to be a major factor in the organization's efforts to maintain and improve excellence in a time when funds are growing short and less staff is available to accomplish expanding goals. One thrust is a major conversion of the Forest Service to an integrated information processing system. The intent of this system is to provide the optimum quality of information to Forest Service employees. This system should maximize information sharing and increase the capabilities of all employees.

5. The Forest Service has a history of highly decentralized training in all field units. The guiding philosophy has been that the local manager has the best insights into both training needs and methodologies. Some key examples of training programs that will support the excellence mode of operation are:

   A. Changing Roles workshops and Civil Rights workshops - To better integrate women and minorities into the changing Forest Service work force.

   B. Facilitator training - To expand the resources available to Forest Service managers in planning, decisionmaking, and problem solving.

   C. Executive development - Which focuses on key managers in order to expand their understanding of human behavior, stress management, personal growth, and public resource management.

6. One of the key areas discussed in most current literature is the need to develop stronger, more cohesive management teams. The Forest Service is now spending energy in team building. Applications range from a workshop designed to accelerate the transition process of new managers to comprehensive team building designs which help work groups with communication improvement, role clarification, problem solving, and leadership strategies.

7. The quality of worklife plays an important role in the organization of the future. Women and men now and in years to come will be more concerned with the quality of their working life which includes job freedom, level of responsibility, ability to grow, quality of management, and an environment of supportive, open relationships. The Forest Service has conducted several pilot Quality of Worklife projects and is in the process of testing these designs for increased use at all levels by the
organization.

The Forest Service may not have all of the answers as to how to become an "Excellent" organization as described by Peters and Waterman. However, the top management of the Forest Service recognizes the need to communicate a clear vision of excellence to all Forest Service managers. A major challenge to the organization will be its ability to create a climate in which the seeds of excellence can grow to maturity. If one message clearly resonates from recent literature it is that we Americans have done well on instilling the harder management values of planning, control, and quantitative decision making in our managers, but have not always been able to merge these with the softer values of employee motivation, work spirit, organizational development, and human potential. When Forest Service managers can successfully bring all these components into concert, they will have succeeded in reaching their goal of true excellence.

Computers . . . con't. from pg. 18

help solve a myriad of complex forestry problems. These modern electronic wizards allow us to "see" the forest as never seen before. They allow us to extend the frontier of knowledge in remote sensing, inventory analysis, management/planning optimization, and growth and yield modelling of virgin or established forests. The abilities of massive data storage, retrieval, and analysis by computers helps foresters to better manage the tens of millions of forested acres around the World. We, as foresters, are stewards of valuable natural resources—land, soil, water, wildlife, and forests. As such, we need all the tools modern science can provide to help us become effective, knowledgeable, and creative foresters. One advertisement by a large industrial firm says "the future is now," and another says "we can't wait!" Another saying, one from forestry, is "We don't plant trees for this generation--- we plant them for the future generations." All of these sayings are true! We need to make the best decisions today for the benefit of the future generations. We need the ability to see the future, as clearly as possible, to aid in these complex decisions concerning forests and all natural resources. The modern computer is our eye to the future and our link with knowledge from the past. Just remember though: the computer may act as our eye, but not our brain. We are the decision-makers, not the computer.

Toughness . . . con't. from pg. 6

foresters will be glad that they did not compromise themselves by merely hoping for better times but took pride in their own pursuit of excellence.

Nowhere can I find a better nor older statement about the pursuit of excellence in the face of adversity than this one written around 700 BC by Hesoid. "Badness you can get easily, in quantity; the road is smooth, and it lies close by. But in front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it; and rough at first. But when you come to the top, then it is easy, even though it is hard."

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