

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the value of creating:

Esteem Opportunities

Motivating people: It's a challenge in any organization—public, private, or nonprofit. The leaders need a strategy for convincing people to pursue the organization's mission with energy and intelligence. And once the organization becomes so large that these leaders cannot personally work with every individual—and this isn't very large—they need to get others to help with this responsibility.

To do so, they create teams—groups who work together on specific assignments. When a team is given a job, its members take over the responsibility for motivation. They motivate each other. Given a complicated task to complete by a specific date, a team automatically divides up the work into sub-tasks and assigns them to individuals or to sub-teams that further subdivide the work.

The success of this team depends upon the success of every individual. Indeed, the success of each individual depends upon the success of every other individual. Thus, they motivate each other: "I can't do my job unless you do yours."

Often, this is called "peer pressure": the members of the team push their colleagues to get their jobs done. But this peer-pressure phrase comes with a slightly negative connotation. In both the psychological literature and in colloquial speech, people associate the

words "peer pressure" with the three evils of teen-age behavior: drugs, sex, and rock 'n roll. When people speak of peer pressure, they are usually referring to a group of unsavory characters who are coercing a more ethical colleague to do something that is sinful or corrupt.



Thus, if the managerial challenge is to motivate the people in public agencies to pursue their mission with dedication and creativity, the idea of "peer pressure" carries the wrong connotation. It's too negative. Consequently, I'm experimenting with the concept of "esteem opportunity."

What do you remember from Psychology 101? If you remember anything, it might be Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." At the bottom of this hierarchy are the basic requirements of human existence: food, shelter, and safety. Next is the need for love and companionship. Until people have satisfied these needs, they are motivated to obtain them.

Once these needs are fulfilled, however, a higher desire emerges—the need for "self-esteem, and for the esteem of others." By self-esteem, Maslow means not a fanciful feeling of self-importance, but a sense of personal worth that "is soundly based upon real capacity, achievement and respect from others." It is a desire for "reputation or prestige," for "recognition, attention, importance or appreciation." Once people have satisfied their needs for

food, shelter, safety, love, and companionship, concludes Maslow, they will be motivated by their need to earn this esteem.

The human pursuit of esteem explains how creating a team can foster positive motivation. People who need companionship will be motivated by peer pressure. They will indeed seek to conform with the coercive demands of people whose companionship they desire. But for those who have satisfied their need for companionship, peer pressure alone is not motivational. These people need esteem. And this new need can be satisfied only through real accomplishment.

This is why teams can be so motivational. A team can give each member a significant sub-task to accomplish. And all members know that each sub-task is significant because they understand the linkages among these sub-tasks and their connection to the larger assignment. Not only is every member dependent upon everyone else. Each also knows that, if he or she does an exemplary job, the rest of the team cannot fail to recognize the significance of the achievement.

Thus, by creating teams, public executives do more than organize and divvy up the work. By creating teams, they also motivate the work. By creating teams, they do more than abet peer pressure. By giving a team a specific and important assignment with a clear deadline, the organization's leaders provide the team's members with the opportunity to acquire self esteem—their own sense of personal accomplishment. At the same time, these leaders also give the team's members the opportunity to earn the kind of respect from their peers that comes only by doing something worthwhile.

When an individual works alone—when his or her work is not critical to the work of others (or if that dependency exists but is

unrecognized)—he or she has no opportunity to earn the respect of others. Indeed, the individual lacks an effective way to gauge whether his or her accomplishment is significant. By putting people in teams, public executives create both a personal benchmark for each individual's work and the opportunity for every member's achievement to be recognized.

Executives have two ways in which they can create "esteem opportunities." The first is to create the opportunity to accomplish something significant. The second is to create the opportunity to be recognized by peers and colleagues for this accomplishment.

People who have satisfied their need for companionship will not be motivated by peer pressure. These people need esteem. And this need for both self esteem and the esteem of others can only be satisfied through real accomplishment.

Such recognition can be conferred in many ways—with a simple, yet public, thank you, or with a large ceremony. The magnitude of this recognition ought to match the magnitude of the accomplishment. After all, real esteem can only be

earned through real achievement.

Teams can motivate with both peer pressure and esteem opportunities. With peer pressure, the message is individual and negative: "Hey: I can't do my job if you screw up yours." With esteem opportunities, the message is collective and positive: "Wow: We were all able to complete our important assignment because you did such a super job." **B**

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