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CREATING EXTRAORDINARY ORGANIZATIONS

Volume Two, Letter 15

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I am writing this letter for those innovators, explorers, and pioneers who want to move beyond the ordinary to the Extraordinary in creating business organizations.

EXTRAORDINARY ORGANIZATION EXAMPLE – Sudbury Valley School

Welcome to letter 2-15. In nine previous letters, I have examined each of the five organizational Core Beliefs [related to Purpose, Authority, Equality, Freedom, and Ownership] and the four organizational Core Processes [Fulfilling individual needs, Developing an effective social system, Developing capability, and Organizing]. In this letter, I am going to provide an example of an Extraordinary Organization that fulfills the beliefs while executing the processes.

Sudbury Valley School

Sudbury Valley School is a true Extraordinary Organization. I know of no other organization that meets all five Core Beliefs in carrying out the four Core Organizing Processes. Although a school, SVS is a business. It pays for inputs, adds value to them, and sells the service [providing a learning environment].

This unique school is no wild experiment. It has operated successfully since 1968 with over eighty percent of its students going on to college, many to the best in the country. There are now some thirty schools around the world operating on its model. In this letter, I am going to look at some of the information that leads me to believe that SVS is an EO.

Process 1: Fulfill the needs and aspirations of organization members

One thing is a bit tricky in thinking about SVS. The 200 or so students and staff of about ten make up both a school and the organization that runs it. In concert with the purpose belief, the school operates strictly for the benefit of its students and staff—as both members *and* clients. The school By-Laws say:

The purpose for which this corporation is formed is to establish and maintain a school for the education of members of the community that is founded upon the principle that learning is best fostered by self-motivation, self regulation, and self-criticism;...

At a policy level, the Assembly governs the school, which is a 501 (c) non-profit corporation. It includes all students, staff, parents of students under eighteen, and some elected outside members.

At the day-to-day operating level, the School Meeting, which includes all students and staff, runs the school. There is no hierarchy—no principal or “teachers”—in the school. Students are responsible for fulfilling their own needs and have complete freedom to do so..

Process 2: Create and maintain an effective social system

SVS excels in its design for building an effective social system. In fact, it is in this area that it most shows itself to be Extraordinary. The School Meeting Lawbook, part of the SVS School Handbook, covers such areas as General Welfare, Use of the School Facilities, and the School Meeting. Part 1 is *Rules Protecting the General Welfare of the School Community*. It describes one major responsibility of community members:

All School Meeting members are responsible for the general welfare of the school, through actions that contribute to preserving the atmosphere of freedom, respect, fairness, trust, and order that is the essence of the school's existence.

The School Meeting is equality personified. It meets every Thursday to discuss and decide any matter brought to it by any member. Members make all decisions by majority vote with each student and staff having one vote.

In the daily life of the school, anyone is free to do anything unless it violates someone else's rights or boundaries set by the School Meeting. These excerpts from Part 1 define the essence of this freedom:

The school prides itself on accommodating a large range of behavior by members of the School Meeting, so long as the behavior of each person show respect for every other person and for the school community as a whole. At any given period in the school's history, the school community, acting through the School Meeting may establish boundaries that limit the range of behavior that is acceptable while a person attends. Each individual is expected to act within these limits.

No one may knowingly infringe on anyone's right to exist peaceably at school, free of verbal or physical harassment.

No one may knowingly disrupt people's activities in the school. "Knowingly: means that the person has either been warned that his/her activity is disruptive or that, without prior warning, the person can reasonably have been expected to know that his/her activity is disruptive.

The School Rule Book details the specific rules that form the boundaries that insure this freedom. The School Meeting has passed everything in it and can change or add anything at any time.

In support of the Rule Book, there is a Judicial Council composed of staff and students. So important is the JC that it is the one "required" activity in the school. It investigates allegations brought to it and handles those found to be credible. If it finds a person guilty, it may warn or talk to him or go further and hand out sanctions. If he does not agree, he may request and have a trial.

Process 3: Enroll capable members and maintain and improve their capability

Building human capability in the school starts with the admissions process. Students must want to enroll without parental pressure. Each applicant spends a full week at the school. After that, both the school and the applicant decide if there is a fit. An important condition is that the applicant must be completely capable of taking care of herself.

Each student is completely responsible for developing her capabilities in whatever areas she wants. There are no classes, no requirements, no grades, no tests, and no transcripts. It is up to every student to determine what she wants to learn and find a way to do it. This is true for academic and non-academic

learning as well as learning about oneself as a person. The staff and other students are major resources for this learning. However, a person may use any resource she can find. Since an individual is autonomous, she must be intrinsically motivated to learn—there are no external rewards.

Although no one assesses a student, this is not true for staff members. In the spring of each year, the School Meeting has a secret ballot election to determine if a staff member returns the next year. This is not a “performance evaluation” by an authority figure. Peers are saying how much benefit they have received from the staff member.

Process 4: Organize members into an effective human system

The members of the School Meeting divide all the activities necessary to operate the school into various functions. They carry out these functions in three primary ways. Each of these operates under rules developed by the SM and recorded in the School Lawbook:

- **Committees**
A number of Committees handle various functions. In general, volunteers make up their membership. However, some include ex officio members elected for other positions by the SM like Clerks and the School Meeting Chairman. Examples of Committees are Financial Management, Admissions, Public Relations, and Thesis.
- **Clerks**
The School Meeting elects Clerks from individuals wanting the position. A clerk has responsibility for some function within the school such as Admissions, Attendance, Elections, and Records.
- **Corporations**
The School Meeting charters Corporations and sets the rules under which they operate. Students who wish to take responsibility for an area of school activities volunteer to serve in an existing corporation or start a new one. The activities of any Corporation are open to all members of the SM. Typical Corporations include Cooking, Dance, Library, Photlab, Science, Sports, Resources, and the Sudbury Valley School Press.

There are three major ways for integrating all these activities. The first is communication that goes on between committee or corporation members. The second is communication between members of different committees, clerkships, or corporations. The School Meeting serves as the final and most important integrator in which all members act together. There are no individuals “assigned” as coordinators or “managers” responsible for integration.

Conclusion

Although brief, I hope this description of the school has given you a feel for how it personifies all five of the core beliefs.

- The school exists and supports each person in fulfilling personal needs and aspirations.
- There is no hierarchy—no principal, and staff has no more power than students
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- There is freedom constrained only by boundaries that the members themselves set.

- The responsibility for all operations, including managing funds provided them by the Assembly, confirms status of members as de facto owners.

There is neither time nor space here to give a full description of SVS and its ways. However, I hope that what I have described has raised many questions. As a start to finding answers please feel free to contact me at dyates@extraordinaryorganizations.com or visit the SVS website at www.sudval.org.

Until Next Time

In this letter, I have provided an example of an Extraordinary Organization in which the five Core Beliefs and the four Core processes come together. In the next letter, I will start the year as I did this year. This will be a short synopsis of each of this year's letters. I want to do this to bring these letters together as a whole to set the context for Volume 3 of Creating Extraordinary Organizations.

Have a wonderful Holiday Season. See you next year!

Be Well, and
Be Extraordinary!

Don Yates
Extraordinary Organizations

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