

CREATING EXTRAORDINARY ORGANIZATIONS

Volume 3, Letter 10
October 14, 2005

Reflections on a Visit to SVS – Part 1

I write this letter for those pioneers who want to move beyond the ordinary to the Extraordinary in creating business organizations.

Welcome to Letter 3-10 of Creating Extraordinary Organizations. In the last letter I looked at the second issue we have to deal with in creating an EO—getting those currently in control to release it. I said that I would cover one of two topics in this letter. The first was another creating issue. The second was a report on an upcoming visit to the Sudbury Valley School. As it turns out, this visit was everything I hoped it would be and more. Therefore, I am going to devote this and the next letter to what I experienced and learned from that visit.

Activities during the visit

In order to provide some context, let me describe some of the activities I engaged in during the 1 ½ days I was at the school.

- Daniel Greenberg [one of the four founders still a member of the staff] gave me a tour of the main building.
- Hanna Greenberg [also a founder] gave me a tour of the outside, which included conversations with some of the students.
- I attended the weekly meeting of the School Meeting [open to all students and staff members with a single vote each].
- I attended the daily meeting of the Judicial Committee on each of the two days. This committee is the steward of the School Meeting Lawbook.
- I engaged in a half to three quarter hour conversation [leaning against the wall in the hall] with a delightful thirteen-year-old girl who I will call Joy, because she was.
- I engaged in a number of conversations with other members of the school.
- I observed all that was going on around me, which was a constant atmosphere of activity and engagement.

Reflections

I want to do two things. First, I want to give you some thoughts I have had on various aspects of the school that I experienced. Second, I want to comment on how these aspects relate to business organizations, especially Extraordinary ones.

Systemic nature of SVS as an organization

I have read a great deal about SVS. I have also corresponded with some of the staff. However, I realized that I had not really comprehended the whole. I knew a lot about pieces, but I had not synthesized them

into a whole. As I immersed myself in the school, I began to understand it as system. This in turn helped me to understand various parts better.

It is essential to see any organization as a system. Without doing this you neither understand nor integrate the various pieces properly.

Intentional activity

One of the first things I observed was how intentional all the activities were. There was lots of activity all around. However, it was not random. Everyone seemed intent and focused on doing whatever she was doing whether playing games, reading, talking, or whatever.

Everyone in a business organization needs to carry out activities with the same amount of intention and focus I saw here. I do not think it matters whether the members are all adults, all youth, or a mix. Nor does it matter what type of organization it is.

Interpersonal age equality

I thoroughly enjoyed this aspect. Age was simply not a factor in any interaction. I do not mean that age did not carry some difference in terms of knowledge, maturity, and so on. However, those interacting just took those differences in stride without paying any attention to them. In the conversation I had with Joy we talked as equals. Or maybe I should say she treated me as her equal since I was definitely learning from her. I saw this going on around me all the time. It was a true breath of fresh air.

Most business organizations consist of only adults. Still their ages will vary widely. Without hierarchical roles to define people, age may become a differentiating factor. It can certainly become a positive one as individuals of different ages learn from each other. Possibly people will look on age and experience as more important when they do not have hierarchical roles getting in the way.

Age mixing

I experienced the great value of age mixing. The whole atmosphere was one of a melding of all ages. In the JC for instance, the two teenage Clerks supported the younger children that came before the JC. This was even more impressive because even while supporting them they had to deal with them as individuals who had violated rules set by the School Meeting.

It was also clear that age mixing was providing learning of various sorts through modeling as well as direct exchange of expertise. Since members of the staff are equal members of the community, students are able to draw on their expertise as well as that of other students. The reverse is also true as the staff is continually learning from each other and the students.

Age mixing does not go just one way, from older to younger. Being with younger students provides the older students many opportunities for learning such as the JC interplay I described. In addition, it was clear that the younger members of the school were adding a level of energy and fun that the community would sorely miss without them.

We can use age mixing to advantage in creating EO's. Even though we do not generally think of business organizations as having great age differences, they do. In fact, the spread of ages is probably greater than in the school situation. If we intentionally see to mixing those ages everyone will gain in more ways than just learning the "business."

Staff modeling

It became clear that one of the strongest modes of learning for the students is the way staff members behave and interact. This became clear to me in the school meeting, although not immediately. I noticed and asked about the fact that staff members participated overtly more than students. At first this seemed to me out of place. However, after discussing it with Dan and thinking about it I saw the great value in their participation.

Many of the topics that came before the School Meeting had complexities that would not be obvious to a student with limited life experience. The staff members did not lecture on these points. Rather, they brought them into the open through grappling with them as full members of the meeting. They were just being themselves. They were not being "teachers."

In doing this they provided more than just information on the subject. They were also showing how one expresses himself and stands up for his ideas in front of others. It was clear from the way that students participated that they had learned a great deal about handling themselves in such a situation.

Of course modeling goes on all the time in business organizations. However, I think few people understand this or how much impact it has on the system. Unfortunately, much of this is modeling behaviors that we want to eliminate in EO's. We need to be sensitive to and explicit about this aspect as we create a new organization. This is especially true as people new to this paradigm will need to learn from those with more experience. This learning can be passed most effectively or only through modeling.

Attention and concentration

If anyone thinks young people cannot concentrate and pay attention over a long time period, they need to attend a School Meeting. The one I attended lasted two hours. Everyone in the room no matter what age was fully there every minute. It was clear that everyone felt an equal and important part of what was going on. It was truly impressive.

How can we replicate this in a business organization? I think only by carrying out all the other aspects in the way I experienced them happening. This level of concentration is the result of many factors. It is not something we can create directly. We must make certain that each person not only feels an integral part of the system but also acts as one. We must do this consciously and continuously.

An important concern

I started this list of comments with the systemic nature of the school. My concern is that in listing them individually I have made it harder, not easier for you to sense this. Unfortunately, writing such as this eletter is a linear process. Therefore, I hope you will step back from the list and look at it as a set of interacting parts.

In other words, try to get a sense of the whole. Of course, you cannot do this fully. I was able to experience the parts together. I did not meet them in a linear fashion as presented here. This allowed me to integrate them internally leading to a sense of the whole. None of the parts can stand alone. Each gets its importance only from being a part of the whole.

Until next time

In this letter, I have not covered two of the most important functions of the school. These are the School Meeting and the Judicial Committee. I cannot do justice to them in a couple of paragraphs. The experiences meant too much. The two functions are too important. I will take them up in Letter 11.

Be Well, and
Be Extraordinary!

Don Yates
Extraordinary Organizations

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