

# CREATING EXTRAORDINARY ORGANIZATIONS

Volume 3, Letter 11  
October 14, 2005

## Reflections on a Visit to SVS – Part 2

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

*Welcome to Letter 3-11 of Creating Extraordinary Organizations. In the last letter, I gave you some of my reflections on my visit to the Sudbury Valley School. In this one I look at two parts of the school that I believe warrant a more expanded look. These are the School Meeting and the Judicial Committee. I see these as the two most important bodies in the school.*

### **The School Meeting**

The School Meeting is the governance body of the school. Its membership consists of every student and every staff member in the school. It is responsible for all day-to-day operations of the school. Each member has a single vote. The members elect a School Meeting Chair at the beginning of each school year. He or she runs the meetings according to Roberts Rules of Order. Attendance is voluntary and those present make decisions by majority vote.

There are at least three impressions I carried away from the meeting I attended. The first concerns the participation of staff in the meeting. It is worth drawing on some of what I said about this in the last letter.

Some of the topics that come before the School Meeting have complexities that would not be obvious to a student with limited life experience. The staff members do not lecture on these points. On the contrary, they grapple with them as individuals. They are just being members not staff and certainly not teachers.

In doing this, they provide more than just information on a subject. They also show 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 well.

The second impression concerns the amount of concentration on the part of all present. Again, let me draw on the last letter:

If anyone thinks young people cannot concentrate and pay attention over a long 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.

The third impression concerns the quality and freedom of student participation. At all times anyone speaking was respectful but also spoke with considerable thought and even eloquence. One situation was particularly noteworthy. The year before several girls had committed a very serious act. As a result, the SM had restricted them to the campus for an indefinite length of time.

One of these, a girl in her early teens, came before the SM to argue that she now deserved an end to her sentence. She pleaded her case in a very reasoned, well delivered, and persuasive way. I would definitely have voted for her, and that seemed the sense of the room.

However, two members disagreed vehemently. They did not make personal attacks but dealt with the request. It was a very real demonstration of the right and willingness of students to voice their stand on a touchy topic. In this case, they did not carry the day; and the meeting approved her request.

I was impressed with every aspect of the meeting. The participation of staff and students together was outstanding. Members considered each issue with serious, clear thinking and great concern. I have never seen the health or operation of any adult organization in better hands than the School Meeting.

### ***The Judicial Committee***

The JC meets daily at 11 to handle any violations of the rules set out in the School Meeting Law Book. The School meeting has developed, passed by majority vote, and can change every rule it contains. The committee consists of two elected Judicial Clerks who serve for two months. Besides the JC clerks there are five members chosen by the SM Chairman who serve for one month. The five include one each from the three youngest groups of students and two from the oldest two groups together. There is also one staff member each day on rotation. As in the SM, the staff member adds balance and experience but only as a participant not a teacher.

One of the first things I learned about the JC is that many if not all members of the SM consider it the most important function in the school. In the talk with Joy that I described in the last letter, she told me that it was the most important part of the school. She did say that the SM was also important, but it was clearly in second place in her mind.

The JC meeting is open to anyone who wants to sit in and watch. I attended both days I was there. It was a fascinating experience. The process in each case was reading the complaint, which any member of the SM can make when she sees someone breaking one of the Law Book rules. Then the committee investigates the allegation. First, it asks the accused about the situation. Then it calls in other individuals who may have relevant information. The committee decides by majority vote if there has been an infraction. If there has, they decide under which code to charge the person. If the person pleads guilty, they move to choosing a sentence. The ones I saw related to the situation—for instance, emptying the trash for littering. They were only as hard as necessary to get the point across to the rule breaker. If an individual pleads not guilty—a rare occurrence given the thorough nature of the process—there will be a trial.

I was very impressed with how these students handled each case. Even the youngest member participated with care and thoughtfulness. Many of the charges concerned some of the youngest students. The clerks were very careful to explain to them the charges. They were also quite solicitous of their feelings and took pains to get them to understand that they needed to change their ways. This was important because many of the young ones were repeat offenders. Watching the interactions between these very active and energetic students and the JC was sometimes humorous but always intriguing. It was obvious that one of the most important functions of the judicial system is to help these young ones understand and integrate with the larger social system

There were also cases involving older students. Again, I was intrigued by the way the two clerks handled the older students—some of whom were not always respectful—with strength and authority. Even though the clerks were younger, they made it clear that the JC was in charge. In one particular case and in one involving a young student who had been a continuous offender, the JC referred the case to the SM for sentencing—something they can do for any case. In their opinion, these cases needed a stronger response than just a sentence given by the JC.

For me this whole process appeared to be a great learning experience for everyone involved. This included those who had just come to watch. The list of things that those present were learning is too long for this letter. As for me, I was finally beginning to understand the value and importance of this part of the judicial system as well as the whole system.

In a talk given to a summer congregation of SVS type schools, Dan Greenberg explained the great significance of the judicial system. Whenever an individual joins a larger community, he must give up some of his individual rights and freedom. This sets up a constant tension between the rights of the whole and the rights of the individual. To deal with this the community sets up rules and laws to define the boundaries of acceptable behavior within the community. However, it is impossible to have boundaries that one or more members do not cross at times. It is the job of a judicial system to deal with these crossings. In doing so, it ameliorates the tension between the individual and the whole. By maintaining these boundaries in a fair and equitable way it protects the stability of the community.

## ***Conclusion***

At this point, I feel that I have done an inadequate job of telling you of the importance of these two parts of the school. There is so much to tell and so much I experienced that I could not convey it all even in a very long paper. I am even less able to communicate my learning and feelings arising from experiencing the school and its members as a whole. Describing the pieces just does not give justice to the whole. The visit was indeed a gift given to me by the members of the School Meeting.

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## ***Until next time***

In the next letter, I am going to return to examining issues involved with creating an EO. The next one on my list is decision-making in an organization with no hierarchy. SVS gives us a great example of this, but there are some ideas around this subject that I want to explore.

Be Well, and  
Be Extraordinary!

Don Yates  
Extraordinary Organizations

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