



SPEAKING OUT

We Are The Key To Reform

BY DON JACOBSON

During his first year as secretary of State, Colin Powell has made some important inroads in reforming the State Department and making it a better place to work. He clearly views himself as the department's top manager and its leader, with a mission to support and inspire his "troops." Concretely, he has already won us a substantial budget increase in FY 2002 to hire more personnel, improve our computer systems, and beef up security at our facilities around the world, and he continues to seek increased funding for our work.

So now that we have growing resources and a strong leader who is making institutional transformation a priority, will State finally turn the corner after so many years of shrinking budgets, institutional rigidity and deteriorating infrastructure? Is Secretary Powell going to succeed where so many of his predecessors have fallen short? We all hope so. But a key part of the answer actually lies with those of us at the working level. For in the words of management guru Peter Block, "change from the top down happens at the will and whim of those below."

The good news is that every supervisor at every level of State has the power — and the responsibility — to transform his or her part of the department into the dynamic, flexible and enlightened organization we would all like it to be.

Here are seven simple management principles that every manager

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can adopt to maximize all employees' development and sense of fulfillment. These principles have already been applied to foster innovation (with great effect) in some of our busiest consular sections overseas and can be applied to any type of work setting.

1. Remember that the most fundamental job of all supervisors is to train and motivate their staff.

If we all focus on developing our subordinates' abilities instead of just positioning ourselves for career advancement, the department will quickly develop a much stronger corps of leaders — which is vital to fulfilling any aspirations State has to maintain a leadership role in foreign policy. While developing our subordinates will often extract a short-term price in terms of staffing shortages, we must learn to view each developmental opportunity as an investment that will pay huge dividends down the road.

A supervisor who focuses on developing his or her employees virtually ensures that they will all

become more motivated and effective, enhancing the overall performance of the office or unit and, eventually, enabling the supervisor to delegate more. The unit's improved operational effectiveness will, in turn, reflect well on the leadership skills of the supervisor. Changing our focus thus does not require giving up any ambitions we might have for career advancement. It is simply a frequently overlooked approach to getting ahead — and one that has far greater benefits for the State Department as an institution.

2. Actively seek ideas and input from your staff.

A huge body of evidence shows that a group's performance improves substantially when its members have a say in how the work is done. Insist that every member of your staff take a hard look at the entire operation and make recommendations for improvements. This should be written into each individual's work requirements statement, and evaluations should comment on how innovative the employee was. In Guadalajara, we further reinforce this mandate both by giving a monthly "Great Idea Award" and by having consular section employees experience our services from the public's perspective as an "applicant-for-a-day." These kinds of stimuli encourage risk-taking, initiative and creative thinking, all of which are good for both the employee's professional development and the department's diplomatic readiness.



3. Provide clear direction and delegate as much as possible.

In order to proceed with any assignment, an employee should receive appropriate guidance from his or her supervisor. If the project is a new initiative that the employee came up with while analyzing the whole operation, he or she should have wide latitude to develop solutions to the problems he identified. If the task originated with you, provide clear parameters for what the end product should look like, but don't micromanage how to get there. The level of intervention will vary with the capabilities of each employee, but managers should push their own comfort zone with respect to letting the employee develop the project on his or her own.

4. Earn the respect of your subordinates every day.

Although the State Department's hierarchical structure vests a certain level of respect in rank and position, supervisors must still lead by example, look after the well-being of their staff, and take a strong interest in the development of their employees. Supervisors who do these things consistently should have little trouble earning the respect of their subordinates. Respect begets loyalty and commitment, which, in turn, build a more productive and enjoyable workplace.

5. Never underestimate the capabilities and dedication of your staff.

"We're too busy," or "There is no time for special projects" should never be used as excuses to put off training and empowerment of your staff. Junior officers are always eager to make their mark, and will find ways to finish their routine work more efficiently in order to find time to work on their pet projects. Those who do not find the time have probably not been challenged to do so. If you think

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your staff is not up to a challenge, it may only be necessary to motivate them differently or give them more training.

6. Reward the achievers.

A very wise senior officer once said, "There are no jobs in the State Department that are inherently career-enhancing. The two most important factors influencing your success are whether you do an outstanding job, and have a boss who rewards you for it."

An employee will be more likely to put in the extra effort if he or she feels appreciated. So supervisors need to remember to reward stellar performance with the appropriate pats on the back, performance appraisals and awards when the time comes. But don't wait until evaluation time to tell each of your employees that you appreciate their efforts. Simple public acknowledgment of an outstanding achievement (e.g., praising someone during a staff meeting) can do wonders for morale.

However, it is equally important to be honest about underachievers at evaluation time. Inflated performance appraisals are most often the result of a supervisor unwilling to confront poor performance in a meaningful way. This breeds a highly destructive form of cynicism.

7. Take responsibility for your own development as a leader and manager.

In order to develop and mentor subordinates effectively, each of us needs to make a long-term commitment to cultivating and keeping up-to-date the necessary personnel skills. All of us can benefit from more formal leadership and management training, and the Foreign Service Institute has recently responded to this need by establishing the School of Leadership and Management. While finding time to attend training courses is often problematic due to pressures caused by staffing gaps, do everything you can to get scheduled for the courses that look most useful to you — and let your subordinates do the same.

Formal training is only one of several possible ways to start, however. There is nothing to stop each of us from picking up a few good books on management and leadership. Whether we get formal training before or after commencing our effort to become better leaders, the leadership training will have the greatest benefits if we internalize the lessons taught and become committed, long-term students of the subject.

Finally, remember that you are not alone. There are many other State Department employees at all levels who would like to right the ship. Find a group of like-minded individuals with whom you can discuss management issues and share experiences about what kinds of methods have worked well in the State Department context.

The first installment of new resources is starting to pour in. The rest is up to us. ■

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