



APRIL 2005 Newsletter

It's been a few very busy months since my last email update, so I thought I'd take a moment to bring you up to date. Many thanks to those of you who contributed to making 2004 a big success and to a great first quarter of 2005.

I've been struck by the applicability of several of my recent projects to institutional strategy and performance more generally, and by the insight of clients working to solve organizational performance challenges in an arena marked by near constant policy ping pong, crisis and unrelenting change. Three themes emerge:

First, customer service. I find the customer service focus important because it speaks to ability to organize for, respond to and focus on diverse customer needs, and because it so often gets oversimplified and reduced to answering the phone on the second or third ring. More common in business parlance than government and non-profit settings, careful thinking about this external orientation can be an extremely effective driver for improving results and changing longstanding habits and perspectives. Too often, we focus on policy reform and big new ideas with scant attention to whether our organizations, regardless of policy direction, are delivering the goods effectively and efficiently. My current work with the New Mexico Public Education Department is, in my view, quite foresighted and unusual in this regard. There, working with Public Works LLC (www.public-works.org), we are helping improve customer focus and service in three areas: teacher licensure, charter schools, and accountability and assessment.

Second, linking policy and practice. My work across organizations in the education space -- K-12 and higher education, state and local, public and private, points to the challenges of linking policy direction with practice across all parts of a system. Much of my high school reform work in particular has raised issues relating to fragmentation and isolation in schools, districts and states, and the need to develop systems to much better integrate and rationalize programs across institutions and groups of institutions. Working with Jobs for the Future (www.jff.org), for example, we developed recommendations for state-wide improvement of career and technical education in the context of overall high school reform and transition from secondary education to college and careers in Pennsylvania. In a similar vein, my work with GMS Partners Inc. (www.gmspartnersinc.org) in Sarasota, Florida focused on better integrating high school policy objectives with on-the-ground programs and priorities.

Third, improving grants, project and program management. An oft-quoted sage once lamented that there are plenty of good ideas, but few good ideas implemented well. This third theme grows from projects that have focused on how organizations manage the grants, programs and projects under their purview, and determine what constitutes effective practice. In the context of grants management in particular, the need to build organizations with strong, easy-to-access project and program management skills is clear, but frequently the domain of either "drive-by" one shot training, or cumbersome technical manuals. My ongoing work with the Corporation for National and Community Service to develop core competencies for effective grants management is an attempt to meet this need. This project is managed through Plexus Scientific Inc., whose web-based strategic management and performance measurement

product, *Visual Performance Suite*, is a powerful tool for helping organizations improve performance. Check this one out at www.visualscorecard.com.

In the higher education arena, I had the opportunity to spend a few days with executives of career colleges (proprietary postsecondary institutions) at their winter senior executive retreat. An important and often underestimated part of the higher education enterprise that further drives home the fact that traditional institutional lines and roles are blurring. My workshop focused on the demands of the new, knowledge economy, and bridging high school, college and career.

You can find more about these projects and other recent engagements on my website, at <http://www.practicalstrategy.org/Projects.htm> .

On a personal note, we just returned from a great spring break vacation hiking and wandering in the Grand Canyon, Sedona and Tucson, Arizona. The trip was a reminder of what a spectacular treasure our national parks, public lands and natural resources are, and how deserving they are of our support and protection.

In the blatant self promotion department, if you or an organization you know face a problem that could benefit from a dose of practical strategy, please email or call me!

Best regards to all,

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