Critique of the National Purpose, Local Action
(The Harvard Project) Final Report

By Jack Harich ~ thwink.org ~ February 13, 2006

I hope this discussion will be taken as an honest attempt to help the Sierra Club to better achieve its objectives. Overall the final report [1] contains many good ideas, and can serve as a major step toward self-improvement. But the Club needs to be aware that the report contains some questionable statements. Of them, the following stand out:

We decided to undertake the National Purpose, Local Action project in recognition of the fact that accomplishment of the national purposes of the Sierra Club had to become grounded in effective local action. p1

This assumes that "effective local action" is the best way to accomplish the "national purposes" of the Club. But where is the analysis or proof this assumption is sound? Good studies should challenge key basic assumptions.

My analysis (online at thwink.org) shows the environmental movement is practicing what can be called Classic Activism. This explains why the Club, as well as the movement, has been unable to achieve its mission level objectives, and is having more and more trouble each year doing so. Thus "effective local action" as presently practiced is not going to work. It is no more than steps 2 and 3 of Classic Activism, which are to "Tell them the truth about the problem and the proper practices" and "Exhort and inspire people to support the proper practices."

From this I conclude that this project is solving the wrong problem, because it is trying to improve the wrong process.

And most local activist groups lack effective national strategy. p1

If this includes the Club, then why not develop an effective national strategy first? Wouldn't this help much more than trying to improve local effectiveness?

We base our measures of Public Influence on the responses of Group and Chapter chairs to 22 questions as to specific advocacy, community, electoral, and outdoor activities during the previous year. p18

This assumes that Club members can accurately measure their own effectiveness (Public Influence), are not biased, and that these are the right 22 questions. This is an unsound assumption. Better would be to replace or supplement this method of measurement with one from the other end, by asking politicians, voters, etc, what influenced their decisions and how much. How the Club ranked in those influences would be much more reliable data.

For example, in *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise,* 2004, Andrew Rich describes on page 77 how the effectiveness of think tanks was measured. It was not done by asking them how effective they thought they were. Instead, 125 congressional staff and journalists were interviewed.

It appears that what the study has measured is how members *think* the Club has performed. Optimists will rate it high. Pessimists will rate it low. Many members won't really know, and so will be forced to guess. Thus the Club still lacks a reliable measure of *actual* effectiveness. *This in turn implies that all data in the study that is correlated on effectiveness is suspect, which includes all the major conclusions of the study.*

Table 6: Overall Effectiveness in Chapters: Public Influence, Leader Development, and Member Engagement. p21

In the first column, 16 out of 62 chapters rated themselves as low on Public Influence. But if we look at how effective the environmental movement has actually been in the United States since the mid 1980s, and particularly since George W. Bush became President in 2001, they should have all rated themselves as having a low influence. That so many did not suggests they were working on easy problems instead of difficult ones like climate change, or that self-assessment is not reliable.

If the measure of Club effectiveness is not reliable, then how can this study proceed to confidently find the factors causing some Groups and Chapters to be more effective than others? Or, if the measure of effectiveness applies only to easy

problems, how useful can the results of the study be for improving effectiveness on difficult problems, which includes the Club's mission?

Effectiveness is how well an organization achieves its objectives. Throughout the study, effectiveness is portrayed as a mix of Public Influence, Leader Development, and Member Engagement. But only Public Influence is actual effectiveness. *The other two areas are effectiveness causes.* For example, if a Group has terrific leaders and 80% of its members participated in a drive to get pro-environmental politicians elected, but none were elected, then how effective was the Group?

To understand how Group and Chapter performance could be improved, we need to focus on what differentiates high performers from low performers. Our focus in the next chapter is to discover what we can learn from the experience of Sierra Club Groups and Chapters by introducing four major families of variables – community context, organizational structure, leadership and action – that can help to explain performance in the Sierra Club. p22

The study is using what's known as *factor analysis*. This is helpful if the factors you need to know about can be correctly identified. However, in complex social systems there are thousands of variables. Which to include in a study is a matter of educated guesswork, unless you have a powerful tool to guide you toward which factors to study. Examples of tools that could be applied are qualitative interviews by domain experts, systems dynamics, experimentation, and meta-analysis of other similar studies. The Harvard Project preliminary and final reports used the tool of *process modeling* to find the factors. However, as the next discussion shows, the tool was not well applied.

In addition, factor analysis alone cannot differentiate between coincident and "cause and effect" variables, because *correlation does not imply causation*. Thus the study contains no hard proof that the "four families of variables" are the causes of differences in performance. They could just as well be coincident, or other equally or more important causes could have been left out. The authors address this point on page 9 by saying: (Italics added)

> "Our data is also a snapshot of the Sierra Club at one point in time. *It is therefore difficult to determine cause and effect.* Nevertheless, we can show which relationships exist and which do not, making plausible arguments about what affects what. Statistical analyses are only the tools we used; they are not the analysis itself. Throughout, we made *judgments* based on our organizational experience, relevant scholarship that informs this project, feedback from those steeped in knowledge of the Sierra Club and our own intuitions, expectations, and hunches from working closely with this data."

The Club should keep in mind that while the authors are top notch sociologists, they are not experienced business managers. Thus their "judgments" of how to manage a business will tend to be more theoretical than practical. The Club should also realize that because correlation does not imply causation, the quality of these judgments is far more important than the reams of data collected and the fancy statistical analyses performed. That there was very little in the report about these judgments, and much about the statistical analysis, may be of some interest.

For example, unless I missed it somewhere, the report does not explain how the "four major families of variables" were selected. They are magically introduced. Where are the alternatives that were considered and rejected, and why? How do the variables selected compare to other organizations, either in the for-profit or non-profit world? The variables are plausible, but there is no way for a reader to determine why they should be the best choice. Thus to me they have low credibility.

Of the four variables, from my experience "leadership" is the most important. Management is a better and more common term. My short definition of business management is that management is the practice of achieving objectives with given resources and constraints. From this it follows that the number one skill for a manager, or a leader, is the ability to achieve objectives with given resources and constraints. Other critical skills are the ability to create and execute strategies, the ability to perform an analysis when needed to make difficult decisions, and the ability to choose tasks that have what Andy Grove calls high managerial leverage.

But when we look at the list of leadership skills, as shown in the box, what do we see? A complete disconnect from the way real managers run organizations. As this list defines leadership, it consists mostly of implementation skills, also called execution skills. Other than "Planning … a campaign," it is devoid of deciding what is best to do, that is, what are the best goals, strategies, and plans for a Group or Chapter. It also excludes the key skill of analysis, which is necessary to make difficult managerial decisions. Let's call these "strategic management" skills. They are an order of magnitude more important than leadership skills, because the best implementation cannot save bad strategy. Therefore it appears the study is studying the wrong thing here.

You may not believe me, so let's compare a modern list of skills of high credibility to the ones in the report. I examined many lists, and selected one that seems to come closest to the very difficult context that Group and Chapter leaders find themselves in. The one selected is from *The Leader's Handbook: A guide to inspiring your people and managing the daily workflow*, by Peter Scholtes, 1998. This is the companion to Peter's *The Team Handbook* (also recommended), which has sold over 800,000 copies. Here is the list of what Peter calls The New Competencies: [2]

> **Leadership Skills Scale Items**
>
> **Managing Self**
> - Listening to other people
> - Accepting responsibility
> - Thinking creatively
> - Accepting criticism
> - Managing my time
>
> **Managing Others**
> - Providing others with support to do their work well
> - Asking for help
> - Asking people to volunteer
> - Delegating responsibility
> - Coaching and mentoring others
> - Challenging others to be more effective
> - Holding others accountable
>
> **Managing Tasks**
> - Organizing and running a meeting
> - Working effectively with public officials
> - Working effectively in coalition
> - Speaking in public
> - Planning and carrying out a campaign
> - Working with the media
> - Managing internal conflict

1. *The ability to think in terms of systems and knowing how to lead systems.*

2. *The ability to understand the variability of work in planning and problem solving.*

3. *Understanding how we learn, develop, and improve; Leading true learning and improvement.*

4. *Understanding people and why they behave as they do.*

5. *Understanding the interaction and interdependence between systems, variability, learning, and human behavior; knowing how each affects the others.*

6. *Giving vision, meaning, direction, and focus to the organization.*

These six competencies may seem to be ungrounded, until you relate then to the diagnosis that Peter introduces at the beginning of his book:

● More than 95% of your organization's problems derive from your systems, processes, and methods, not from your individual workers. Your people are doing their best, but their best cannot compensate for your inadequate and dysfunctional systems.

● We look to the heroic efforts of outstanding individuals for our successful work. Instead we must create systems that routinely allow excellent work to result from the ordinary efforts of ordinary people.

● Changing the system will change what people do. Changing what people do will not change the system.

● Current buzzwords like empowerment, accountability, and high performance are meaningless, empty babble.

● 95% of the changes undertaken in organizations have nothing to do with improvement.

Now let's compare the two lists. There is quite a difference. The ones from the study are at a much lower level of leverage. They are more like beginner middle

manager or supervisory skills, with good employee skills mixed in. Yet Sierra Club Groups and Chapters are independent corporations, with members, elected officers, programs, and budgets, and little outside management from the national organization. Their leaders are top executives in every sense of the word. Furthermore, they are pioneers. They are trying to solve difficult, pressing problems that have never been solved before. And they are doing it mostly with volunteers, with no large stream of income behind them.

Given that situation, which list of leadership skills do you think will help the Club the most? Remember now, the list of New Competencies includes the entire other list, because its higher level concepts translate to all the lower level ones.

We assess organizational effectiveness in three ways: (1) Leader Development, (2) Member Engagement, and (3) Public Influence. p10

It is well known that the key driver of organizational effectiveness (business system output) is quality of management. It is more important than any other factor. This includes Community Context, because that is merely an aspect of the resources and constraints a manger has to work with. This also includes Organizational Structure, because a good manager can change that if necessary, even if it's the one she is in. So it is quality of management that is the most important determinant of organizational effectiveness.

But what do we find when the report gets to how it will measure leadership? Much to my astonishment, it does not measure skill level. Instead, it measures *changes in skill levels*, and blithely insists that is a measure of leadership effectiveness. It is not.

On page 2 the report defines "leadership" as "the values and experience of the individual ExCom members, how they learn to lead, their strategy, and how well they govern themselves – deciding what to do and organizing themselves to do it." It is listed as one of the four causes for "differences in effectiveness." But by the time the report gets to measuring it on page 10, leadership is no longer a cause of effectiveness. Instead, "leader development" is. It is true that "leader development is critical." But there are somewhere between dozens and hundreds of factors that are also critical. By morphing from leadership to leadership development, the study has stumbled badly. Quality of management is the number one cause of quality of organizational effectiveness. One of *its* causes is leadership development.

Let me repeat that. Leadership development is a cause of good leadership, and quality of leadership is the primary cause of organizational effectiveness. But by dropping the concept of quality of leadership itself (it was discussed in Chart 6.3 in the preliminary report, and then not used again) the study is arguing that leader development, along with member engagement, are the top proximate causes of Public Influence. This is not so.

For example, suppose you had a Chapter with a fantastic leader development program. Metrics show that "leadership skill development" is growing nicely. It is improving rapidly, as shown by, say, a 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. (The same scale the study used.) And suppose Member Engagement was high. Would all be well in grassroots activism land? According to the study, it would.

But suppose the *quality of leadership* was very low, say a 2 on a scale of 0 to 10. It was growing at 10% a year, which is impressive. But at that rate how long will it take to reach excellence, say a 9? Whipping out my calculator, it will take about 15 years. But that doesn't matter, because according to the study, it is the *rate of skills development* that determines performance. Rubbish. *It is the current skill level of management that determines performance.*

Furthermore, the study failed to correct for leadership turnover. If leaders are self-assessing their own improvement, and it is very slow (which it was in the study), then if the rate of improvement is adjusted for turnover, then it is somewhere around zero! (This may be one reason the Club is losing so many Groups.) But once again, that doesn't matter, because according to the study, it is the self-measured *rate of skills development* that determines performance. (This paragraph assumes that new leaders require improvement, which the study strongly implies is the case.)

The problem seems to occur because the study is confusing organization output with organization building. The report begins with quality of leadership causing organization output, which is true. Then it muddles into improvement in

quality of leadership causing organization building, which is also true. But then when it presents the process model, it slips into saying that improvement in quality of leadership causes Public Influence (by way of Member Engagement), which is not true. It is quality of leadership that causes Public Influence, by way of management of others.

The process model and various conclusions in the report should be repaired, to indicate that improvement in quality of leadership is a cause of quality of leadership, which causes Member Engagement, which causes Public Influence. Additional causes of quality of leadership include better recruitment and better strategies from upper to lower management so lower management has easier problems to solve. The latter is a powerful organizational leveraging technique that the study did not include, but from my experience would make a bigger difference than any of the factors the report included. But this can go into a future iteration.

To explain why some Groups and Chapters are more effective than others, we constructed an 'input-output' model of how the Sierra Club works. To the right we show the outputs: Leader Development, Member Engagement, and Public Influence. – Figure 2: Process Model of Organizational Effectiveness. p23

It was useful to see the various smaller process diagrams that show what areas of the total process model "explain" the three outputs. Figure 5 from the report is an example of this:

Figure 5: Explaining Public Influence
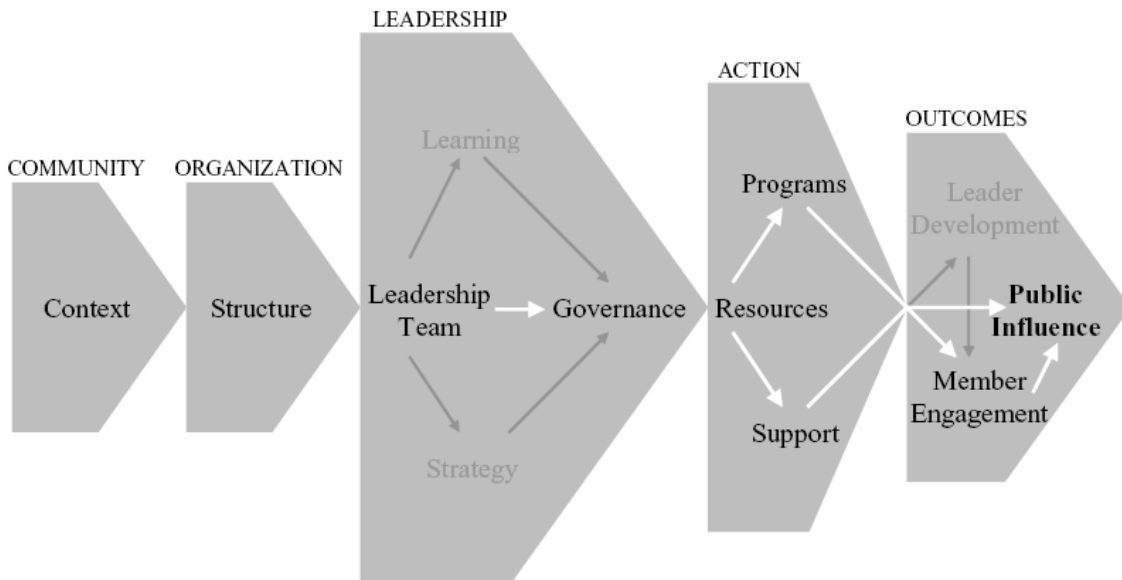
The process model contains errors. One is that Leader Development and Member Engagement are not outputs (mislabeled as outcomes on the model). Outputs are where an organization's interface with the world changes that world. Only Public Influence is an output.

Another error is the model has no feedback loops. All efficient processes have crucial feedback loops. For example, the model should have an arrow showing how the measured or estimated results of Public Influence are used to improve its Strategy. Without any feedback loops the model is an old fashioned, non-iterative waterfall process.

Another error is it looks like Community drives the entire process. It does not. Quality of leadership and the results of system output are the key drivers.

Another error has already been mentioned. Notice how Leader Development causes Member Engagement, which causes Public Influence. This is an error. But the authors confuse things still further with another arrow from Action to Public Influence. I believe that arrow should be dropped. But then again, it appears the entire process model needs to be revised. This is normal, if the study is considered a first iteration.

A good process model would state the key quantities that are being measured or estimated to determine process status and effectiveness, anywhere in the process. It would also show the key work points, decision points, and feedback loops. These features would allow managers to discuss process improvement in practical detail. That cannot be easily done with the present model.

Except for Community, the process model is really just a visually organized list of what the various areas of the organization are doing, and vaguely how they work together. It is good for public or supplementary use. It is not a well thought through flow chart of an actual decision making and action process, which is what is required for serious internal use.

For example, a more realistic model of how volunteer driven "effective local action" really works would show something like What I Want to Do → Action → Public Influence as the backbone of the process. Local and national management then attempts to influence this core work flow with a backlog of suggested things to do, policies, meetings, training, communication, and so on. The beginning of this more accurate model might look like the one shown, where "What I Want to Do" has become Local Decisions.

The two variables in bold seldom change. All the rest can be improved. Behind these variables lie the various elements in the study's organizational effectiveness model, plus the Community context. Now we can see that the proper role of the study's model is to serve as a collection of organizational elements that serve to optimize companion elements in the work flow model. *The better the organizational elements, the better the emergent effectiveness of the work flow process.*

An Example of the Backbone of the Sierra Club's Work Flow Process

It is much easier to analyze past behavior and improve future behavior with a work flow model, because it shows key process areas, process flow, and feedback loops clearly and correctly. For example, issues like "How can we improve local decision making?" are much more easily addressed, because you can start by improving its three inputs, where there is usually more leverage.

Notice how much more useful the model becomes when national is included. One of the golden rules of systems analysis is that *if the whole system is not considered when trying to improve performance, suboptimization will occur*. Suboptimization is rampant in most organizations. It appears under the guise of turf wars, stove piping, misallocation of resources, communication problems, coordination problems, change resistance, bottlenecks, inefficiency, large delays, and so on. All of these are preventable if one sees the forest instead of the trees.

Let's return to the observation that the study's process model lacks a feedback arrow from output to strategy. Usually when good management starts a strategic planning cycle, the first thing everyone wants to know is "How did we do in the last cycle? How much did we miss our targets by?" Thus the absence of this arrow contains a large clue as to where the Club might better put its efforts. The Club is currently running blind, because it does not have immediate, accurate feedback on how it is doing in achieving Public Influence. This is akin to a for profit corporation not tracking its profits. Because you cannot manage what you are not measuring, creating this feedback loop would probably pay much bigger dividends than effort to improve effectiveness at the Group and Chapter level.
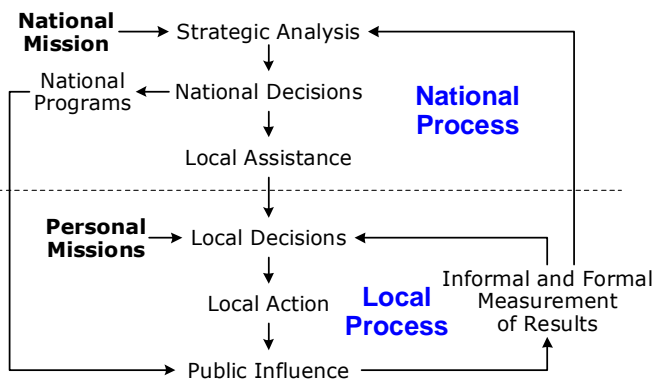
Conclusion: We also saw that running active, well-supported, and well-governed programs was the number one thing Groups and Chapters could do to make the most of their community context. p75

The report contains a number of unsupported conclusions like this one. How can the authors say that anything is "the number one thing" an organization could do, unless it has examined *all* the things the organization could do to achieve something? Less misleading would be to caution the reader that, *of the alternatives this report studied*, this was the number one thing.

Conclusion: Groups and Chapters who do a better job of developing their leaders and engaging their members will have the resources they need to run active, effective programs and thereby achieve Public Influence. p75

Note the last phrase, "and thereby achieve Public Influence." I've argued that Public Influence is the only real output in the process model. If that is so, then according to the above proposition, the Club can achieve its mission by "doing a better job of developing their leaders and engaging their members."

This is not true, for several reasons. The simplest is that "better" includes doing something even a little better, such as a 1% improvement. But a 1% improvement in "developing their leaders and engaging their members" would absolutely not solve any important problems. Thus "better" is a meaningless term, which makes the entire conclusion worthless.

Another reason it's not true is much more subtle. Even with great leaders and 100% member engagement, the Sierra Club's membership is still a tiny rowboat in an ocean of other organizations, and a united, much larger opposition. The opposition, according to my analysis, consists of corporations and their allies, which includes the rich, the military, and recently, the religious right. This is somewhere in the ballpark of over 100 million people, and they all vote against environmental responsibility, because they are told to do so. Even if the Club engages 100% of its members, it is not going to make much of a difference against such a large opponent.

Thus this conclusion paints a false goal. Achieving it will not solve the environmental sustainability problem in the United States. This is part of the myth of Classic Activism.

Perhaps "achieve Public Influence" does not mean achieve enough to solve the problem. In that case, it is an empty, vaguely defined goal, and makes this conclusion not very useful.

While the Groups and Chapters that excel in developing leaders, engaging their members, and asserting public influence are relatively few, we can learn from their experience. p77

It is good to see the concept of learning from experience and excellence.

What this work most requires is a clear-eyed commitment to the proposition that the only way the Sierra Club can fulfill its national purpose at this point is to invest its financial, staff, and moral resources in developing its leaders, enhancing its organizational capacity, and conducting programs of effective local action – rekindling the movement that the Sierra Club played such a key role in launching. p78

This is a fallacious proposition. If "effective local action" was the most effective way to cause large scale national political change, then we would see the opposition doing it. Instead, starting in the 1970s, they begin focusing on an entirely different method: *public policy institutes*, also known as think tanks. What these are and how well they are working for conservatives is clearly explained in a six page article by Andrew Rich, published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring of 2005. The title is *The War of Ideas: Why mainstream and liberal foundations and the think tanks they support are losing in the war of ideas in American politics.* [3] Even a casual read of this online article will show that public policy institutes are much more effective than grassroots activist organizations, when it comes to what the Harvard Project report calls Public Influence at the national level. This is not a new discovery. It has been true for decades.

As the article argues, think tanks can work for progressives or conservatives. Thus they can work for the Club. They are not the complete path to a solution, but it does appear they are much more effective than grassroots approaches for this type of problem.

For example, the Brookings Institution achieves its incredible influence and credibility on a budget of a mere 33 million dollars a year. [4] The article quotes President Lyndon Johnson as saying of the Brookings Institution, "After 50 years of telling the government what to do, you are more than a private institution. You are a national institution, so important, that if you did not exist we would have to

ask someone to create you." How many environmental grassroots organizations have been even one tenth as effective as this particular think tank, and many more?

Of interest is the article points out that it takes a certain thrust to make think tanks work, and that currently most liberal think tanks do not take this approach.

Let's return to considering the above proposition. It is the final sentence in the report, before the appendix. It is thus the final summation of the report. To me this summation is not a conclusion that follows from the facts, because the overwhelming evidence, as well as my own analysis, points in a different direction.

In addition, the final sentence does not follow from the study's investigations. *There is nothing in the study that proves the hypothesis that grassroots activism is an effective mechanism for solving difficult environmental problems like climate change.* Thus there is no proof whatsoever that the "Five Opportunities for Action" will have a significant effect on achieving the Club's national purpose.

How could such a large study by such eminent scholars come to such erroneous conclusions?

It appears the study was biased from the start. This can be seen from the way the report opened on page 1 with "We decided to undertake the National Purpose, Local Action project in recognition of the fact that accomplishment of the national purposes of the Sierra Club had to become grounded in effective local action." This sentence is essentially the hypotheses that grassroots activism is an effective mechanism for solving difficult environmental problems. *By not challenging this fundamental hypothesis the authors were building a castle on sand.* But why did the authors not challenge it? Because the study leader, Marshall Ganz, is a grassroots activist himself, as shown in his researcher biography: "In 1965 Ganz joined Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers union. During his 16 years there, he learned union, community, issue and political organizing; developed programs with union, electoral, issue, and community groups, and founded an organizing institute."

However, the authors were not alone in this bias. Club management is even more committed to grassroots activism, and is thus even more unlikely to challenge their own fundamental assumptions. It is they, and not the study's authors, who are to blame. This strong commitment to grassroots activism can be seen in the project announcement letter from Club President Larry Fahn and Executive Director Carl Pope on September 1, 2003. The letter stated that:

> "The goals of the project are to:
> - *Describe: A detailed, comprehensive overview of the Sierra Club - Resources, Strengths, Challenges, Potential.*
> - *Understand: In what ways are some groups and chapters more effective than others? What works and why?*
> - *Build Capacity: Build the capacity to learn from our experiences, into the organization.*
> - *Share: What can we teach other progressive grassroots organizations about improving their effectiveness in order to revive democracy?*
>
> "We expect it to clearly identify the strengths and successes of chapters and groups, pinpoint the areas of need and development, improve local, chapter and national alignment, guide the development of training curricula, improve the delivery and support provided to chapters and groups, identify new structures for today's activists, and provide templates to activists."

Thus the project was launched on the basis of two key hypotheses: (1) That grassroots activism works on difficult problems, and (2) That Groups and Chapters will work, if only we can figure out how to improve them. But the first hypothesis has never been proven true. Groups and Chapters are an implementation of the concept of grassroots activism. Therefore the second hypothesis has also never been proven true. Thus the project was doomed to an erroneous conclusion from the start, unless the Club had directed the study authors to challenge all fundamental assumptions, or the authors had taken it upon themselves to do this as a matter of professional responsibility. Neither of these occurred.

As a final observation, the overall approach used in the study differs remarkably from how most corporations approach effectiveness improvement. They rarely

rely on stacks of questionnaires and heavy statistical analysis by sociologists and those with little business management experience. Instead, they employ highly qualified internal or external consultants, as well as their own best managers, to walk around the actual business, make observations, ask questions, and use that and their expertise to rapidly pinpoint what needs to be done. They also tend to do this in less than one tenth the time and with less than one tenth the labor this project has consumed, which was two years and over 5,000 person hours. [5]

The project can, however, serve as a vehicle for change. . . .

* * *

In the above discussion we used the term "grassroots activism" instead of Classic Activism because the former is a more familiar term. But once you fully grasp what Classic Activism is and what its limitations are, you will probably prefer that term. For an introduction to Classic Activism and many related concepts, please see the FAQ at thwink.org.

The study can help some. Group and Chapter performance can be improved in a number of ways. But even a radical improvement will not be enough. Something much more is needed.

Next this paper goes beyond what should normally be included in a critique, so that the Club can begin to consider its options.

The Characteristics of Easy and Difficult Problems

The Club needs to be aware of why Classic Activism is not working. *It is not because of underperforming Groups and Chapters.* It is because Classic Activism can only solve easy problems, like local pollution or regional clear cutting. Difficult problems like climate change require a different approach, because they have characteristics that make them inherently difficult to solve.

Easy problems have the following fundamental characteristics that make them fairly easy to solve:

A. They are caused primarily by a single type of behavior, such as the way acid rain is caused mostly by the burning of sulfur-containing coal, or the way a river may be mostly polluted by a single group of chemicals, such as agricultural runoff or factory waste.

B. There is solid proof of cause and effect, such as the way accumulation of heavy metals in animals higher up in the food chain causes health problems, reproductive problems, or death.

C. There is a short displacement in time and space. This makes cause and effect more obvious. Displacement is the "distance" from cause to effect. For time this may be anywhere from minutes to years to centuries. For space the displacement may be local, regional, or global.

D. The problem source involves a relatively small segment of society.

E. The solution is relatively cheap and easy.

Difficult problems are just the opposite. They usually have multiple types of behavior that cause them, tenuous proof of cause and effect, a long delay in time and space, the source involves a large segment of society, and the solution is relatively expensive and complicated. Each of these alone makes a problem hard to solve. When combined they can make it close to impossible to even conceive of a solution that can be proven to have a high probability of working.

The combination of the factors also causes the emergent problem of what we call "resistance to solution adoption." This phenomenon occurs when people know what they should do, but they just don't want to do it. This is clearly present. An outstanding example occurred in 1999 when the US Senate voted 95 to zero against the Kyoto Protocol treaty on climate change. The treaty has not been brought back to the floor since.

An example of an easy problem was the ozone layer depletion problem. While it looked like a tremendously difficult problem at the time, it was not. It fit the pattern of easy environmental problems. It was caused mostly due to a single type of behavior: chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) released into the atmosphere from air conditioners and refrigeration equipment. It had solid proof of cause and effect, after scientific studies were completed. The problem source involved a relatively small segment of society: the CFC manufacturing

and use industry. And finally, it had a relatively easy and cheap solution: switch to a substitute.

There was a medium delay in time and a large delay in space, but because the other four factors were present, the ozone layer depletion problem fit the pattern of an easy problem, despite its apparent size and complexity. As a result, by the 1990s the ozone depletion problem was largely solved.

But it was the only "difficult" global problem that was. The rest, such as climate change, many other types of pollution, groundwater depletion, topsoil loss, desertification, deforestation, and abnormally high species extinction rates, remain unsolved. The reason is they do not fit the pattern of an easy problem, and so are beyond the capabilities of the conventional problem solving approach.

The global environmental sustainability problem falls into the difficult end of the spectrum for all five of these factors: (A) Almost every industrialized action we take to produce our food, go to work, generate the energy we consume, build our homes and offices and factories, etc, is a source. (B) Although proof we must change course to be sustainable is seen as solid by scientists, it is still seen as weak by society, because of arguments like new technology will solve the problem (technological optimism), as well as the way the very idea of unsustainability is inconceivable to many people (the cultural blindspot problem). (C) There is a long displacement in time and space. For example, climate change has a time displacement of centuries and a space displacement of global. (D) The problem source is nearly every person, corporation, and government on the planet. (E) The solution is very expensive and difficult. How do you get over six billion people to fundamentally change their entire life style to solve the entire problem in only a generation or two? No one knows. And how do you finance that change? Again, no one knows.

The modern environmental movement fell into the trap of believing that Classic Activism works because it did work at first, in the 1960s, 70s, and some of 80s. This is because the movement tackled the easy problems first, because they were more obvious and easier to solve, and hence more attractive. But later, as the more difficult problems like climate change, habitat loss, desertification, groundwater depletion, deforestation, and abnormally high rates of species extinction were confronted, progress stopped and the movement stalled. There it has remained, because the problem solving process of Classic Activism cannot solve difficult problems.

The Limitations of Classic Activism

Classic Activism is the basic process that activists, including environmentalists, have been following for centuries. Classic Activism is used by citizen groups, particularly progressives, to solve problems that governments are not addressing. Examples are discrimination, women's suffrage, the dangers of smoking tobacco, and the plight of the poor. If it is extremely successful, then governments assume solution responsibility.

Classic Activism has three main solutions for every problem:

1. Find the proper practices that people should follow.

2. Tell the people the truth about the problem and the proper practices.

3. If that fails, exhort and inspire people to support the proper practices.

What does the environmental movement do when these fail to work, as it happening today? *Almost exclusively more of the same, but stronger.* For example, all the Sierra Club is really doing is steps 1, 2, and 3. Its researchers are doing step 1. Its magazine, members, staffers, volunteers, and lobbyists are doing step 2. And when that fails, which is has, the level of urgency and inspiration is raised a little or a lot higher, by the same people who are doing step 2. And then when steps 2 and 3 fail for a long time, which they have, valiant attempts (such as the Harvard Project and other change initiatives) are made to improve the process for doing steps 1, 2, and 3. But because it is the wrong process, improving it will not change a thing.

The chief limitation of Classic Activism is it is the wrong process for solving difficult complex social system problems. This is because:

1. *Classic Activism has only three main solutions for every problem.* More are needed for difficult problems, especially to overcome solution adoption resistance. For example, none of the "proper practices" proposed by classic activists are deep structural changes to the system. They are only changes to what people should do. This is a subtle point.

2. *Classic Activism is common sense based, instead of experimental proof based.* Common sense is a mixture of true and untrue assumptions. Because you cannot tell which is which, the bigger the analysis and solution, the more unsound it is: exponentially. Easy problems require only a small analysis and solution, and so the curve of unsoundness is low. But difficult problems require a large analysis and solution, which, because of the exponential curve, will contain such a high percentage of unsoundness that it will fail.

3. *Classic Activism is an ad hoc (informal and improvised) approach.* Informal process cannot be radically improved, because there is nothing repeatable enough to improve.

4. Because Classic Activism has no formal continually improved process, *it has failed to recognize that the social side of the problem is the crux.* By now the world is aware that it must live sustainably. There are countless proven, practical ways to do this, which is the *technical side* of the problem. But for strange and mysterious reasons society doesn't want to adopt these practices, which is the *social side* of the problem. Therefore the social side of the problem is the crux.

5. *Classic Activism is event oriented, rather than systems thinking oriented.* Systems thinking is seeing the world as structures of feedback loops. Problems are caused by faulty structures. Sound solutions can only be based on changing faulty structures to ones whose normal behavior is the desired behavior. It follows that to solve a difficult complex system problem, you must deeply and correctly understand its structure. There is no other way.

6. Because Classic Activism is not systems thinking oriented, *classic activists are pushing on low leverage points and doesn't even know it.* If systems thinking was employed and a proper analysis was done, problem solvers would find the hidden social structures lying at the root of the problem. From there they could then go on to find the correct high leverage points and push there instead, which would give them enough leverage to solve the problem. ***Thus the chief consequence of Classic Activism is pushing on low leverage points.***

The more we know what the limitations of Classic Activism are, the clearer the real flaw in the study becomes. The study is trying to improve standard business operations. It is *not* trying to improve the actual problem solving process of the system, because it is not thinking in those terms. Instead, an ad hoc, common sense, event oriented mindset has led the authors and the Club to thinking in terms of the impressive buzzword of "organizational effectiveness." The narrow-mindedness this imposes has led to the firm, widely accepted notions that "We need better leadership!" and "We need better member engagement!" and so forth. But these are unsound conclusions. All they do is shuffle the same deck of cards, at enormous expense. Nothing really changes, because as Peter Scholtes stated on page 3, "Changing what people do will not change the system."

If the Club sincerely wants to be able to solve difficult problems and thereby achieve its mission, it needs to challenge its fundamental assumptions. As this paper has argued, *the* fundamental assumption is its commitment to grassroots activism as a panacea for all types of problems.

The Alternative to Classic Activism

The logical alternative to Classic Activism is Analytical Activism. If the Club decides to take this route, here's how to get started:

First, study the material at thwink.org as if the lives of 6.5 billions people and their descendents depended on it. Then get top management to commit to Analytical Activism or another process just as good. By commitment we mean this is now what you are living for. You now talk, walk, and dream about nothing but Analytical Activism and how to make it work. It takes total commitment, because it requires total transformation of the entire organization, from head to toe. The heart and soul of the organization must change in three ways: (1) from an informal process to being driven by a formal, continually improved problem solving process, (2) from common sense to experimental proof for all key problem solving decisions, and (3) from event oriented to systems thinking.

This cannot be done alone. If it could, the Club would have already started down this path. Instead, it requires a guide until you get your wings. To find this guide, do the same thing an aggressive, well run corporation would do: find another corporation who's done it

and do what they did, or hire a consultant. If the Club chooses the second option, here is a typical Cycle of Consulting that could do the job:

1. Situational Analysis – What is the problem?
2. Organizational Assessment – What are the causes and the context?
3. Strategic Planning – How can we solve the problem, short and long term?
4. Implementation and Monitoring – To be sure the problem gets solved.
5. Iteration and Improvement – Solution evolution so the problem stays solved.

If this cycle is applied by a highly qualified consultant familiar with Analytical Activism and top management remains fully committed all the way to step 5, then by the time you get there the Club will be practicing Analytical Activism. The result should be a problem solving productivity increase of at least an order of magnitude, because unlike Classic Activism, Analytical Activism is based on the only known method of producing reliable knowledge: the Scientific Method. And, unlike Classic Activism, a properly applied process using systems thinking can find the right high leverage points and lead to solution elements that will allow the Club, together with the environmental movement, to have a very high probability of achieving its dreams.

Endnotes

[1] The preliminary and final reports are available at:
clubhouse.sierraclub.org/go/leaderpositions/national_purpose.

[2] The 8 reader reviews at amazon.com on The *Leader's Handbook*, by Peter Scholtes, are mostly raves. One in particular caught my eye:

> "**A model for the leaders of the future** – October 22, 1999 – *I knew that the organization I work for was stuck in the stone-age (Dismal Leaders). Then something amazing happened. Upper management decided we needed a change. Due to my background in Teambuilding, I was asked to Champion the change for the future. I decided to utilize most of the things I learned from reading this insightful book. The results to this point have been outstanding. People are beginning to come out of their shells and be creative again. Barriers are slowly coming down throughout the organization. Real Work is getting done through cross-functional teams of people who care about customer satisfaction. We have a long way to go, but as long as management sticks to their word, change will happen. This book is a useful tool for that transformation. Everyone who is in a management position should read this book and learn what it's like to truly lead your fellow workers. I also recommend the Team Handbook."*

[3] The *War of Ideas* article is online at www.ssireview.com/pdf/2005SP_feature_rich.pdf.

For a further and more detailed description of how conservative think tanks have been able to steamroller over progressives, see chapter 6, *Systems Understanding*, in the manuscript to *Analytical Activism*. This is online at thwink.org. This chapter includes what is probably the most amazing read in the book: the material on how the notorious *Powell Memo* of 1971 caused the overnight creation of a wave of conservative think tanks, and ultimately the rise to power of the Bush administration in 2001. Progressives, and progressive institutions such as the Sierra Club, have much to learn from this phenomenon. For a quick read there is a 7 page extract containing just the material on the Powell Memo.

Also see *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*, by Sharon Beder, 2002. This has chapters on Conservative Think Tanks and Think Tanks and the Environment.

[4] See www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/2005/DAT/1364.html for Brookings Institution data.

[5] Total person hours can be estimated this way: The 15 page ExCom Survey by 1,624 at 90 minutes apiece is 2,436 hours. The 280 ExCom Self-Assessment 3 ½ hour Sessions at 7 hours each is 1,960 hours. The 368 ExCom Chair 50 minute phone interviews at 2 hours apiece is 736 hours. This totals 5,132 hours for data collection alone.