Comments on “Guerrilla Employees: Should Managers Nurture, Tolerate, or Terminate Them?”


These are the typical reactions I received from the students in the MPA class that I taught last year for the University of Kansas, in which we studied Professor O’Leary’s book, The Ethics of Dissent: Managing Guerrilla Government. The text was extraordinarily useful. By placing boundaries on acceptable administrative behavior, the students developed a more precise definition of what it means to meet the multiple obligations inherent in public administrative roles.

I was surprised, however, at the narrowness of the boundaries that students defined as acceptable. For the majority of the students, notably those in public safety organizations and those who were relatively new to their public roles, working outside formal reporting channels or in conflict with policy and management directions was viewed harshly as self-serving insubordination in all but the most extreme circumstances.

Yet the students were equally adamant in their support for the types of organizational strategies that Professor O’Leary lists in her article to encourage productive dissent. In fact, I think they would have endorsed the entire list of six strategies offered by practitioners as a manifesto on how to manage an effective public organization. This dichotomy suggests three interrelated lessons that I find relevant in my roles as an instructor and as a public manager.

*Allegiance matters.* My experience, as reflected in the overriding value that my students placed on loyalty, is that organizational allegiance is not something that only managers need or expect. It is something that everyone in the organization needs, expects, and, in fact, actively seeks as part of a sense of personal identity and self-respect. Employees want to belong, and it is painful for most to feel disaffected to the point of guerrilla activity, just as it is painful for the target of guerrilla activity to feel betrayed and disrespected. Perhaps the question is not whether to nurture, tolerate, or terminate guerrilla employees, but how to nurture allegiance—how to build an organizational culture rooted in mutual support and respect. In my experience, being able to manage differences in ways that demonstrate mutual support and respect is the single biggest predictor of organizational success. A culture of disrespect for or indifference to contrasting views and the values they reflect diminishes allegiance. And once an employee’s sense of allegiance is violated, everything else unravels.

*Dissent matters.* Dissent will always find a way to express itself, and an organization without productive channels for dissent is a time bomb. What explodes is not always guerrilla action. Just as often, it is high turnover, low morale, poor work performance, interminable gossip mills, and a host of other destructive behaviors.

Most of the guerrilla activity analyzed in Professor O’Leary’s work is aimed at affecting public policy, but the more likely and insidious threat is the fallout from unhealthy organizations or work teams, quite often where a very tight chain of command and high workload demands are accompanied by poor communication channels.
dissent. Their analysis was evidence that support for management decisions is best achieved through effective management processes that acknowledge, if not assimilate, dissent.

Process matters. Dissent in organizations often involves differing views over a policy or decision, but as often as not, the real issue is how the decision was made. Many public sector problems are what Hefitz and Lipsky call adaptive problems, the sheer complexity of which requires communities and organizations to deploy appropriate processes to engage stakeholders in crafting a way forward. Effective management often begins with an openness to co-create the strategy, not merely an openness to absorb dissent about it.

As my students grappled with particular cases of guerrilla activity, they found themselves trying to figure out how the conduct could have been avoided and, in doing so, articulated decision-making strategies that were characterized by fact-finding, inclusiveness, equity, transparency, and consensus building. These are the principles that inform my role as an administrator in an organization dedicated to bringing diverse communities and interests together in order to find common solutions to metropolitan issues. In most circumstances, a good decision-making process will lead to the best possible decision, which mitigates the likelihood of either open dissent or guerrilla-style opposition.

So, back to Professor O’Leary’s question: What do managers do with guerrilla employees? We all have to answer that question from time to time, and given that there is no clear line defining acceptable guerrilla activity, the answer will be largely situational. But, to follow the lead of my students, I suggest a more compelling question: How can we minimize guerrilla activity? My answer: Nurture allegiance. Tolerate productive dissent. Terminate managers who make decisions void of good processes.

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