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REINVENTING GOVERNMENT: TRANSFORMING THE ALAMEDA COUNTY MOSQUITO ABATEMENT DISTRICT INTO A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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THE PROBLEM

In the Spring of 1991, the efforts of employees of the Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District seemed to be stalemated. Many unresolved problems had accumulated and had worn employees down. The already complex problem of attempting to deal with 19 species of mosquitoes in 813 square miles of Alameda County had been compounded by a myriad of challenges.

Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the District was posed by the forces of wetlands creation. In the last two decades, the trend of decreasing mosquito sources in the District had been reversed. Wetlands were being created and enhanced all along the bay front, often in close proximity to residential homes. Although the District involved itself in the planning and management of the wetlands, regulatory agencies, operating from a incoherent tangle of one-dimensional laws, were inexorably eliminating tools of mosquito control and making mosquito control increasingly complex (Roberts 1993).

At the same time the challenges to the District's effectiveness were growing, political and economic forces were operating to reduce the ability of the District to respond effectively. Budget constraints following Proposition 13, exacerbated by the current recession, prevented staffing the District at pre-Proposition 13 levels. Meanwhile, political forces created a disturbing climate of uncertainty. State legislators appeared to have little appreciation for government by special districts and, in the name of regionalization and efficient government, were considering legislation that further threatened the District.

The employees of the district, in the face of these challenges, were being required to acquire ever-increasing levels of technical knowledge with regard to mosquito control technology and the environment. A new "biorational" program was developed to comply with regulations which excluded traditional chemicals. Yet, initial efforts at implementing biorational control met with only partial success. Total employee commitment was needed, perhaps a paradigm shift to a different environmental ethic. At this very critical time, when a new way of thinking about mosquito control was required, employees seemed incapable of such a transformation. Old and new employees alike were stuck in old ways of thinking when new ways were needed.

Employee morale and the ultimate fate of the district seem to be locked in a precipitous decline. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness were creating a deep malaise in the organization. Employee disillusionments was evidenced by burn-out, cynicism, and withdrawal.

MANAGEMENT COMPLICITY

The District in 1991 was organized in a typical hierarchical structure (Fig. 1). The District was divided into zones which were assigned to technicians. The organization of the district tended to foster independence

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and perhaps even competition between employees. It became more and more apparent, however, that efforts to solve the emerging tidal wave of problems would require employees working together more efficiently. Initial efforts at fostering teamwork, however, using project management techniques, were again only partially successful.

Management, seeing the critical need to change, increased top-down pressure to make changes that seemed appropriate from the management perspective. The efforts produced employee resistance rather than change- A top-down management style was exacerbating the problem rather than solving it. It became apparent to management, after an introduction to the book *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge, that the District was suffering from common maladies of today's organizations - diseases of the hierarchy (Senge 1990). The District hierarchical organization and top-down management style created an organizational defensive pattern (ODP) in the District that distorted information flow (Argyris 1990). The result was that the District remained inflexible and rigid in a rapidly changing world. In the words of Peter Senge, the District was suffering from a "learning dysfunction."

Perhaps most difficult to accept was that the District's problems could be traced to very specific management behavior termed Model I behavior (Table 1). Model I behavior was the engine of ODP (Fig. 2), reinforcing defensive routines and anti-leadership behaviors. It was only when management recognized its own complicity in the problem that the issues began to be addressed effectively. In the Spring of 1991, management asked the employees to read the first chapter of *The Fifth Discipline* to decide whether they wished to use the book as a blueprint for re-organization. On May 5,1991

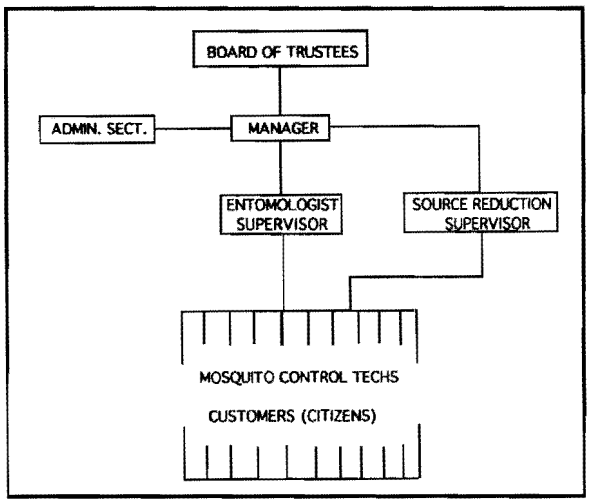

Figure 1. Organizational structure of the Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District prior to re-organization in 1993.

the employees of the Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District committed to re-organize into a "learning organization" as described in the book. A plan was developed to accomplish transformation from within.

A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

A learning organization is a newly emerging type of organization designed to combine adaptive learning, aimed at survival, and generative learning to enhance the capacity to generate innovative solutions.

Employees of a learning organization employ five essential disciplines:

1) Personal Mastery - where employees are deeply committed to learning and actualizing,

Table 1. Comparison of consequences in an organization of action decisions made in Model I and Model II styles.

	MODEL I	MODEL II
GENERATE IDEAS	Own and control ideas (top-down flow).	Collaborate using dialogue, advocacy and inquiry.
SELECTION METHOD	Unilateral decisions (e.g., "Tell me what I want to hear").	Consensus or participation.
ACTIONS	Seek to be in unilateral control, to win, and not to upset people.	Seek valid information, make informed decisions, monitor results, and minimize face saving.
CONSEQUENCES	Variety constrained, options limited. Compliance leads to resentment. Resistance leads to reduced efficiency. Limited learning.	Variety enhanced, options increased. Empowered individuals leads to enrollment leads to greater efficiency. Double-loop learning.

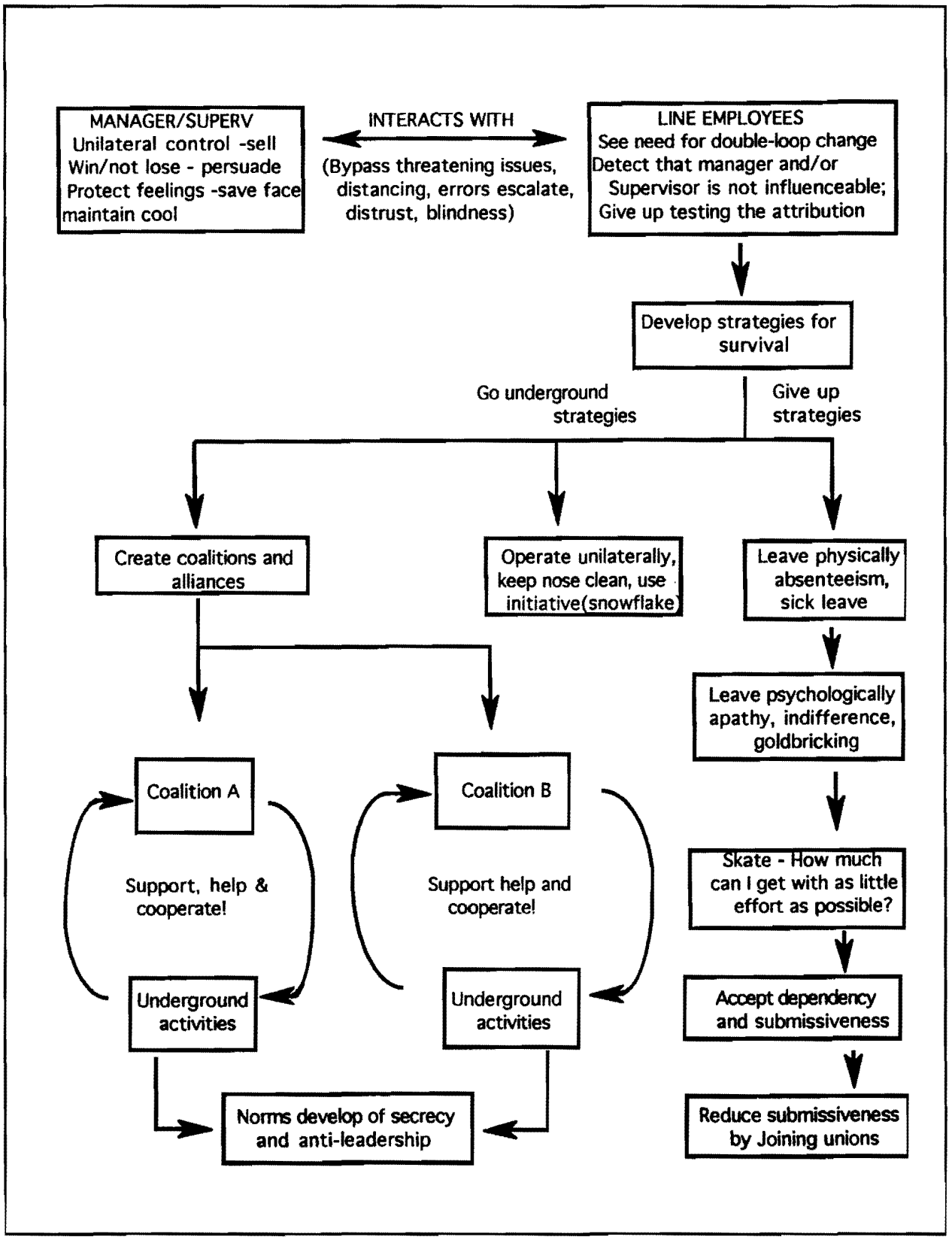

Figure 2. Organizational Defensive Pattern (ODP) as inferred from Argyris (1990).

2) Creating a Shared Vision - to create alignment and orientation for the employees,
3) Team Learning - to create knowledge and learn together,
4) Interpersonal Communication Skills - enabling employees to surface, test and improve their assumptions about problems,
5) Systems Thinking - to recognize how everything is connected to everything else.

The District implemented the re-organization in three phases: First, an "internally initiated intervention phase" when all employees took the responsibility to teach and learn the new skills. A consultant, Dr. Miro Valach, was brought in to teach systems thinking to the employees.

Second, an "external intervention phase" was initiated to expedite the process. Dr. William Reckmeyer was brought in to facilitate program planning sessions aimed at restructuring the District's biorational control of winter marsh mosquitoes and treehole mosquitoes. The sessions fostered a broader environmental perspective by way of stakeholder analysis; empowered employees to make the necessary structural changes in the District; and emphasized and institutionalized team approaches (Fig. 3). Perhaps most importantly, collaborative leadership was modelled (facilitation techniques). Dr. Reckmeyer's efforts resulted in the development of a successful biorational program for wetlands mosquito control.

And lastly, Mr. Jeffrey Dooley worked with the employees to develop interpersonal communication techniques emphasizing collaborative techniques described as Model II behavior (Table 1). He met with employees in monthly workshops designed to teach employees to surface, test, and improve their views of District issues. Problems that were only discussed at the water cooler began to be addressed in constructive ways.

RESULTS

In the District's monthly report of June 9, 1993, The District manager reported that The Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District had transformed itself to a learning organization and described the process of the transformation. Although, by definition, the transformation would never be complete, in his view, the District operated more like a learning organization than like a traditional organization. He reinforced his conclusions by citing data that revealed a highly successful biorational control effort that had just been completed.

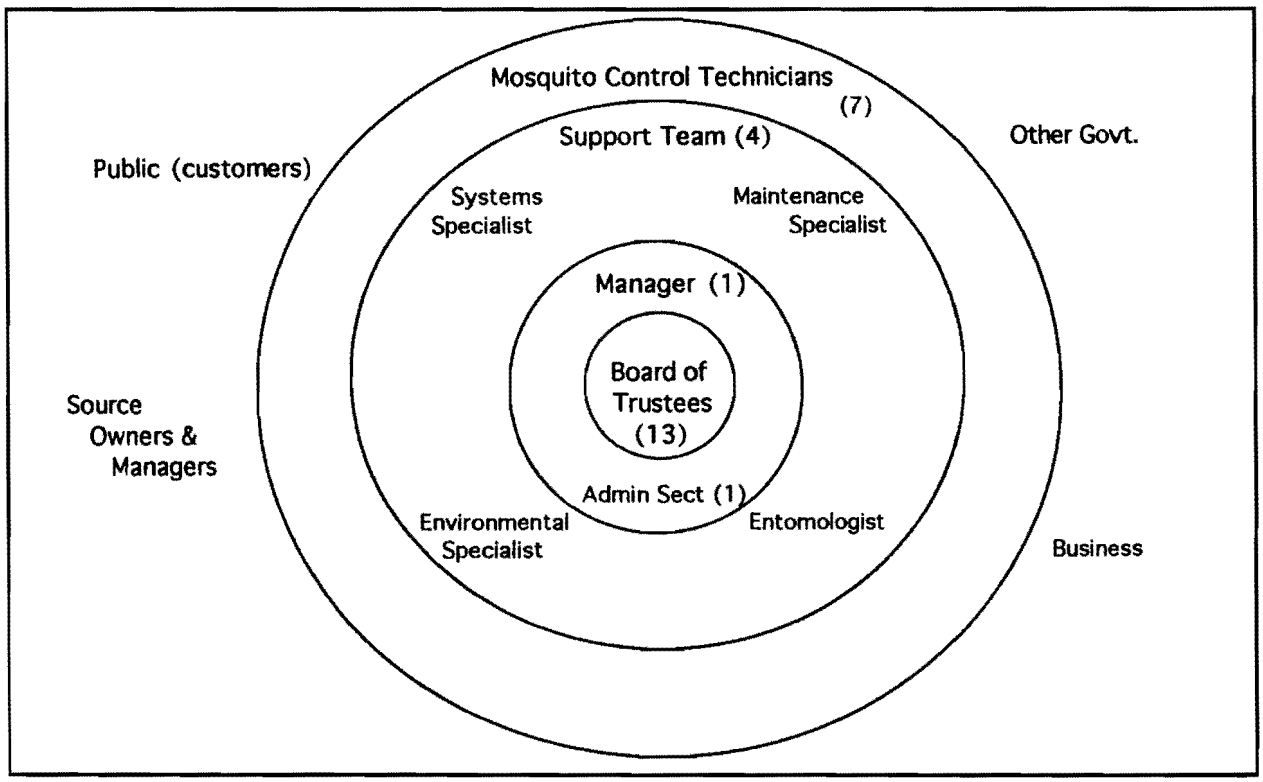

Figure 3. Organizational structure of the Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District after re-organization in 1993.

Today, in the Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District, major decision-making responsibility resides with the employees, including hiring, evaluating, and firing personnel, as well as equipping the District, and maintaining quality. Employees expect individual commitment to learning and to an employee-produced shared vision. Hard-won skills of interpersonal communication operate in weekly facilitated sessions to insure that tough issues are discussed openly. Management, in the meantime, has directed its efforts to negotiating the resource bargain between employees and the Board of Trustees, and auditing the results of District operations. Beyond audit and resource bargain, the manager's role is that of supporting the learning organization.

A learning organization is a new species of organization that has evolved in our chaotic world. It is designed to maximize flexibility to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. We do not know all of the problems or solutions that will be encountered on the way to more effective mosquito control in Alameda County. It is apparent, however, that the viability and longevity of the learning organization depends upon the mutual support of Trustees, management, and employees.

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