

MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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- Before discussing the management of SED projects, one must first examine a few fundamentals and their implications.
 - First we are Bahá'ís so we must look at management from that perspective. What does it mean to manage as a Bahá'í? It means we abide by His bidding. It means we turn to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas for guidance. There we find “The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws.” And “to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world.”
 - Next we must re-examine the purpose of SED projects as presented in the Universal House of Justice letter dated 20 October 1983. The House tells us that ‘In unnumbered verses and tablets He [Bahá'u'lláh] repeatedly and vigorously declared the “progress of the world” and the “development of nations” as being among the ordinances of God for this day.’ We are also told in that same letter that:

“...the concept of social and economic development is enshrined in the sacred Teachings of our Faith. The beloved Master, through His illuminating words and deeds, set the example for the application of this concept to the reconstruction of society.”

[The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 20 Oct 1983]
 - The bottom line is clear. First, since we are Bahá'ís, the management of SED projects is a matter of the Covenant. Far fetched? Not really, for it is our firmness in the Covenant that should guide our every deed. The Covenant is that stabilizing axis that assures our unity, that defines us as Bahá'ís. Second, our purpose for the establishment of SED projects is nothing less than the reconstruction of society. Imagine that, the reconstruction of society.
 - The coupling of the Covenant and the reconstruction of society sets the stage for framing an SED project, communicating its purpose to the community, and managing it

accordingly. In its letter of July 12, 1984, to an individual believer, the Universal House of Justice stated that:

“It cannot be over-emphasized that venturing into social and economic development rests upon the fundamental principles enshrined in the Teachings concerning the inter-relationship between the spiritual and material aspects of life, and if social and economic activity is not placed on a spiritual basis, it may well prove counter-productive or even harmful, as without a spiritual base the people are likely to become corrupt or materialistic.”

- With this general understanding let us now look at some specific practices that one may want to consider in managing SED projects. Some of these might well be items to include in an SED project values statement or management philosophy statement. The (importance of the) existence of such statements somewhere in a document that defines the project cannot be over emphasized. Those who work on the project need both a practical and spiritual road map for helping them understand how to get the job done; what is acceptable behavior and what is unacceptable.
- In this regard, I’m reminded of the phrase we have all heard at one time or another and that is “we walk the spiritual path with practical feet.” In the business world we say “make your numbers,” “get the job done,” or more crassly, “show me the money.” The Guardian addressed the matter with a bit more eloquence.

“The eagerness of the friends to serve, often carries them away, and they forget that a sound sense of business management is also much needed, if we are to harbour our resources and accomplish all our goals.”

[Shoghi Effendi, *Light of Divine Guidance* v I, p. 216]

- The management of SED projects demands that we be accountable. This particular management principal comes to us courtesy of the Blessed Beauty. What He exhorts us to do is fairly straight-forward.

“O SON OF MY HANDMAID!

Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds.

Everyone must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds. In this wise We counsel you in this holy and resplendent tablet.”

[“The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh”, Persian # 76]

- Unity among those engaged in an SED project is particularly important. Because of its impact on organizational effectiveness, it cannot be taken for granted. The viability of a project

demands that the leader discourage those behaviors that lead to disunity and promote that which creates a loving environment. The most effective teams don't just like each other, if the truth be known, they actually love each other. Love is a powerful force. It is the source of attraction, of bonding, of team effectiveness. Just look at the way sports teams are always hugging each other. They don't call it love, but that's what it is. Love is unity.

Leaders need to guard against those behaviors that cut into the unity of the team. I am sure you can guess what behaviors are at the top of the list. It's our old nemesis, gossip and backbiting. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, February 11, 1925, we read:

“Bahá'u'lláh says in the Hidden Words; 'Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command ACCURSED ARE THOU.' The condemnation of backbiting could hardly be couched in stronger language than in these passages, and it is obviously one of the foremost obligations for Bahá'ís to set their faces against this practice. Even if what is said against another person be true, the mentioning of his faults to others still comes under the category of backbiting, and is forbidden.”

This guidance is clear but what happens if there is a performance problem? Is talking about someone's performance gossip? There should be no confusion here. Performance issues must be dealt with, but it is not usually made a matter of public discussion. It needs to be addressed with firmness, compassion, and to the extent possible, kept confidential. Even in cases of poor performance, we need to remember that we are dealing with someone's soul. Hurt feelings are not a motivator and not likely to lead to the reconstruction of society.

Sometimes unity may suffer when there is an air of secrecy between what I call the “Ins” and the “Outs.” Or to put it another way, those in the know and those who would like to know. There is the possibility that some information about the project must be kept confidential. Fortunately, the Universal House of Justice has given us the necessary guidance on how to conduct ourselves in such situations.

“Every institution in the Faith has certain matters, which it considers should be kept confidential, and any member who is privy to such confidential information is obliged to preserve the confidentiality within the institution where he learned it. Such matters, however, are but a small portion of the business of any Bahá'í institution. Most subjects dealt with are of common interest and can be discussed openly with anyone. Where no confidentiality is involved, the institutions must strive to avoid the stifling atmosphere

of secrecy; on the other hand, every believer must know that he can confide a personal problem to an institution of the Faith, with the assurance that knowledge of the matter will remain confidential.”

[From a letter dated 2 August 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly]

The absence of detachment can be another source of disunity. Those who work on the project with an attitude of “I’m right and you’re wrong” can be particularly problematic, especially when the person is stubborn, rigid or ego involved. The Guardian’s guidance on this is particularly incisive and apropos.

“Nothing is more contrary to the spirit of the Cause than discord and strife, which are the inevitable outcome of selfishness and greed. Pure detachment and selfless service, these should be the sole motives of every true believer. And unless each and every one of the friends succeeds in translating such qualities into living action, no hope of further progress can be entertained. It is now that unity of thought and action is most needed. It is now, when the Cause is entering a new phase of development, when its Administration is being gradually consolidated amid the welter and chaos of a tottering civilization, that the friends should present a united front to those forces of internal dissension, which, if not completely wiped out, will bring our work to inevitable destruction.”

[From a letter dated 24 September 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer]

A project leader who is attached to his way of doing things or his position of control will eventually become a source of disunity. His ego-based behavior will stifle the organization’s vitality and shut down communication.

Have you ever wondered if there is a difference between losing face and ego-based behavior? In my view, there is no difference.

- Let us switch gears now and look at what can be done to build and preserve the unity of those engaged in an SED project.

Encouragement is a practice that should be right at the top of the list. Criticism is not a motivator. Success breeds success. We need to praise small steps. How quickly a child learns to walk is often influenced by parental praise. Criticizing every step will stifle the child’s willingness to try. Encouragement empowers. The House of Justice addressed this in its 9 January letter to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors.

“In every avenue of service, the friends need sustained encouragement. ...When training and encouragement are effective, a culture of growth is nourished in which the believers see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Bahá’u’lláh.... So enkindled do their hearts become with the fire of the love of God

that whoever approaches them feels its warmth. They strive to be channels of the spirit, pure of heart, selfless and humble, possessing certitude and the courage that stems from reliance on God. In such a culture, teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers. Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms.”

Although this quote speaks to teaching, I think the same can be said about SED projects.

When there is open communication in an organization, people are more apt to feel a sense of empowerment. Accordingly, particular effort should be made to keep everyone in the loop. Information is power. Sharing information is a motivator. A lack of information creates organizational speculation and suspicion. And controlling information stifles team building. As previously mentioned, an atmosphere of secrecy or the controlling of information can be disheartening and actually promote gossip, backbiting and rumors.

Another useful tool for promoting organizational effectiveness and unity is to adopt a learning mode. Having a learning mode is key to the development of human resources and success of an SED project. No project is going to be perfect. To expect perfection is unrealistic no matter how precise the plan. It will not be perfect because we are dealing with human behavior. To enhance our effectiveness, we sometimes need to lighten up. That is not to say we get sloppy in our work. On the contrary we must continually strive to do our best. However, a statement I heard from Haleh Correa at an institute workshop in Ecuador bears on this point: “Perfect is the enemy of good, because good is never good enough.”

“It was particularly heartening to note that the board is approaching its tasks with an open attitude towards learning, fully cognizant of the need to make decisions about the content and methods of the institute programme, to implement them, to reflect on the results, and to make adjustments in the light of experience. Through such an approach, your institute will succeed in gradually increasing its capacity to develop the human resources of the Bulgarian community.”

[Letters of the Universal House of Justice, 1998 04 00, Training Institutes]

Not unlike adopting a learning mode, an SED project should be approached with flexibility. Recall that a plan is just that, a plan. The rigid management of a project is not management, it's excessive control and may be an indicator of a lack of spiritual and material self confidence. We must be prepared to go with the flow and also take risks.....informed risks. However, I

would be remiss in if I did not say that the more quality consultation characterizes the project, the less risky the decisions become.

Some organization cultures suffer from what I term the NIH syndrome. NIH stands for “not invented here.” NIH creates an organization of silos with impermeable walls. It causes some to think that if it is Not Invented Here.... I won’t use it. Such a mind-set creates barriers for learning and collaboration. Such a mind-set stifles development.

We need to legitimize using someone else’s ideas for the success of a project. Sharing is a catalyst for success. All that we have is given to us by Bahá’u’lláh anyway. The World Centre’s Office of Social and Economic Development has provided us with the following guidance:

“What is to be avoided is the artificial fragmentation created by separate programs set in motion in a given population by professionals in specific disciplines, each ignoring the knowledge and experience of other groups, each competing for resources and for the constant attention of the people they are to serve.”

[OSSED letter dated 16 Sep 1993]

NIH is old world order behavior.

In its Ridvan 2001 message, the Universal House of Justice has, once again stressed the importance of being systematic. They state:

“Abroad in our world community there is a heightened awareness of the value of process, the necessity of planning and the virtue of systematic action in fostering growth and in developing the human resources by which expansion can be sustained and consolidation assured. The coherence of understanding about these prerequisites of progress cannot be overvalued, nor can the importance of perpetuating them through well-ordered training be overestimated.”

[Ridvan 2001 message]

So what does it mean to be systematic? At a meeting of the friends a few months ago, I found that they had little difficulty describing what it means to be unsystematic but really wrestled with describing what it means to be systematic. There are a number of ways to describe being systematic. Some examples include exercising common sense, simplifying the complex, engaging in rational organizational planning, developing learning based plans, etc.

Since time does not allow for a substantive discussion of the subject, I recommend that you turn to Larry Miller's paper entitled "On Becoming Systematic." It is well thought out, is very user friendly, and can be found online at www.mdssed.org.

- In closing, I would like to present you with a little formula that you may find helpful in addressing the effective management of an SED project. $\text{Group's Performance} = \text{Group's Potential} - \text{Process Loss}$

The formula tells us that in order to have our SED project reach its potential, we may well look at how to reduce SED Process Loss items? Here is a list of actions

- Manage as a Bahá'í
- Do not take unity for granted
- Look for opportunities to encourage others
- Maintain open communication
- Be flexible
- Be detached
- Have a learning attitude
- Avoid the NIH syndrome
- Be systematic
- Follow the lead of our True Exemplar, the ultimate SED project manager.