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EVST 537.01: Effective Environmental Organizations

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EVST 537: Effective Environmental Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

Every course is based upon a set of assumptions and the biases/ understandings of the instructor. Let me set mine out, noting that I use conservation and environmental interchangeably.

Conservation is about change. Aldo Leopold wrote, "Conservation is a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence and caution." Continuing, he warned, "prudence never kindled a fire in the human mind; I have no hope for a conservation born of fear." As Leopold implied, a conservation born of promise could inspire the human imagination. Creative entrepreneurs would inextricably link human social and economic ambitions to the protection of natural, ecological function.

Dreams of a better world, a vision for what could be are the wellspring for inspiring the human imagination to initiate change. Speaking extemporaneously upon learning of Martin Luther King's murder, Robert Kennedy rekindled the nation's hope with his words:

Some men see things as they are and say why
I dream things that never were and say why not

Dreams, ideas do make a difference. They move us to take action...to change.

Change, to be effective and sustained, requires organization. Early conservation-environmental organizations (1960's-1970's) tended to focus upon action, often taking it to the streets. They were not concerned with organizational structure and maintenance but in capturing this moment to change the world.

By the 1980's the Group of 10, all large national environmental organizations based in Washington, D.C., came to dominate the conservation agenda. Seeking a place at the table, they developed a strategy of lobby, legislate and litigate that necessarily required them to secure substantial financial and human resources. Over the years these organizational maintenance needs became more critical than organizational purpose and mission. But these national organizations set the tone for environmental work. Increasingly environmental groups at all levels "professionalized" their operations and staffs squeezing the citizen activist.

By the late 1980's early 90's the environmental community came to the table ready, willing and able to play the inside game. Despite increased capacities,

however, the environmental community struggled to have meaningful influence on the political process that is had bought into. Environmentalists got hammered time and again by special interests that benefited from reduced environmental protection. All too often decisions at every level of government dismissed environmental harm as negligible, even when science and the facts suggested otherwise.

The environmental community has responded in two ways. Mainline, established environmental groups have turned ever more inward disengaging from civic discourse using branding and marketing sound bites instead to generate public support. Having opted to be players in the dominant political economy, their rhetoric is informed by economics. So rather than talk about a healthier, more just world, they negotiate cap and trade deals or fret over the cost-benefit analyses of globalization and ponder the trade offs between environmental protection and economic growth.

The second response is happening through local organizations less concerned about organizational maintenance and their reputations and more concerned with achievements on the ground. The best of these groups recognize the problem is not the environment---so the answer is not environmentalism---but rather ourselves. Through their progress based work these groups are engaging the community in attempts to reform our core values and our capitalist economy. They recognize that environmental degradation is driven by the economic activity of humans. Growth is the enemy of the environment. WE need to change who we are and how we live.

In our efforts to understand conversation/environmental organizations we have focused upon their missions, strategic approaches and tactics. What we have failed to understand adequately is that, when all is said and done, these organizations are groups...groups of people trying to work together to achieve some shared dreams. If we are to be more effective we must understand better human behavior and what we know about how humans interact in groups, organizations and communities. Such understanding will enable us to build more effective organizations and provide the foundation for how we might better address the changes we need to make in ourselves.

COURSE PURPOSES

The purposes for and organization of EVST 537 flow from this discussion. Specifically the course asks you to:

- set out your dream, your vision for a better world.

- using your vision as a starting point, write a program plan proposal for creating an organization to achieve your vision.
- demonstrate that your plan is informed by the best literature and set of practice skills available to you.
- document how your plan is grounded in your understanding of human behavior and how we relate in groups, organizations and communities.

COURSE READINGS

Stan Hutton. Frances Phillips. **NONPROFIT KIT FOR DUMMIES**. You should purchase this; it covers all the nitty-gritty of non-profits and is handy to have in your library.

Elizabeth D Hutchison. **DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR: PERSON AND ENVIRONMENT**. I assigned this book to give us common understanding of human behavior and, more particularly, how our behavior is shaped by groups, organizations and communities. Unfortunately this book is ridiculously expensive so I would suggest that you purchase it in groups and share. During the course of the semester you should read:

Parts 1 and II; and Chapters 9; 11; 12 and 13.

Within each part or chapter there will be portions that may not be relevant. Forget them!

ASSIGNMENTS

1. The major assignment is to write a program proposal plan for a new or existing organization. Elements of your proposal must include: mission; history of the organization (don't worry if starting something new) program plan including goals, methods; budget; fund raising plan and an appendices. The appendices must include discussion of how your understanding individual behavior and how individuals relate within groups and organizations informed your proposal. If several of you have common interests, you may develop your proposal together. A fuller explanation of the elements of this assignment will be given in the second week of class.

You will present your plan orally to the class towards semester's end and in written format to me by the final exam date for this class: 10, May. During the semester there will be opportunities for you to share portions of your proposal with your classmates to learn from each other.

2. I would like you to write a 5-8 page personal essay in which, considering your leadership strengths and limitations, you reflect upon where you see yourself in ten years.

If either of these assignments is problematic for you and/or you have ideas about other ways you might approach them, please talk to me. I want this class and its assignments to be constructive and meaningful for you so I am open to your ideas.

3. Throughout the semester there will be group exercises and short, individual assignments to do for the next class. My expectation is that you will participate conscientiously in the group endeavors and give your best effort on the short assignments.

GRADES

My primary interest is that this class "work" for you. I don't want grades to interfere with you asking questions, taking chances or risking making mistakes. Truth is, birthing and sustaining effective environmental organizations is more art than science. Therefore each of you enters the class with a grade of B. Participate in class, do your assignments thoughtfully and generally contribute to our collective learning and you should earn an A. Failure to contribute, to do thoughtful work and your grade will go south of a B.

CLASS SCHEDULE

I may be copping out, but I don't want to commit to set dates by which we shall cover specific topics and readings. Each of you brings your own set of experiences and expectations to this course and, to use our time together wisely, I want to respect that. You know the due dates for the two written assignments (10, May) and towards the end of April we shall establish a schedule for your oral presentations. In class each Wednesday I shall lay out where we are going and assignments and readings for the next week. At times I may be shrewd enough to project beyond a week and, if so, I shall share my clairvoyance with you.

I want to reemphasize that this class is for you, not me. I have 45+ years of experience with non-profits as a founder, executive director, board member and consultant. I can fill each class period with my chatter; I can probably be more helpful to you when I limit that and you ask questions or tell me what you want more or less of. My point is, we are in this to learn together so don't be shy about helping me try to be most effective in helping you.