

The Debureaucratization of Chicago

WHAT IF GOVERNMENTS were to tap the wisdom of their employees, the ones who know how things really work? In Chicago, Illinois—a town long known for “machine politics”—the program “Models of Excellence” has done just that.

Models of Excellence is leading Chicago's government agencies one-by-one into the modern world of customer-driven, responsive, and efficient operations, through problem-solving teams and employee participation. “The program offers employees tools for examining and improving their own work,” says MOE director Joyce Hollingsworth.

MOE is part of the Government Assistance Project, a program of the Chicago Community Trust, a 78-year-old community foundation that uses endowment income to fund charitable and civic initiatives. The program's core belief is that centralized, authoritarian environments crusted over with bureaucratic procedures sap the initiative of effective, productive workers. So, MOE teams are encouraged to ask, “Why do we do it this way?” Typically, the answer is, “That's how they showed me to do it.”

The teams recognized that a major obstacle to improvement was the high rate of turnover in appointed positions, so they decided to focus on the “B” players, people who stick around as top management comes and goes. Within 18 months, MOE's “multirank” teams of management and line employees had begun solving problems in 10 city and county agencies. Government officials noticed MOE's accomplishments. “When agency leaders saw the impact that this new approach could have on their workforces,” says Hollingsworth, “it really captured their attention. Many of them wanted to apply it systemwide.”

The Chicago Public Library. Versie Barnes, a library employee for more than 16 years, believed that the system for delivering books and mail between the main library and its 83 branches would always be slow. In fact, outside consultants had failed to improve it. Then in 1992, Barnes was

chosen to lead a MOE team of library employees. This time, the actual workers who knew the system set out to find a solution. The first step was analyzing the routes of the delivery vehicles, through a one-page survey sent to branch heads and regional directors. Of the 93 forms sent, 90 percent came back with telling comments. Most of the delivery trucks had been in service for more than four years; on a given day, at least half were in for repair at an average cost of \$900. When the team presented the data to executives, they decided to lease trucks rather than own them. Says team member Roberta Webb, “We focused on the problem; management came up with the solution.”

Like many of the GAP-sponsored teams, the library team met opposition from coworkers in trying to peel off bureaucratic layers. “Many people thought we were pointing fingers,” says Barnes. Supported by first deputy commissioner and chief librarian, Carla Hayden, the team designed a decentralized delivery process. Team members spent a week teaching staff at pilot sites how to use the new process. “We showed them the basics,” says Barnes, “and they came up with some improvements of their own.” Delivery time was reduced by 92 percent to a maximum of 24 hours, and the number of steps went from 23 to five for mail and from 34 to 10 for books. The process is being phased in one district at a time; each district helps train the next.

Library Commissioner Mary Dempsey says, “It shows that, given the opportunity, front-line workers can solve complex problems.” In fact, other employee teams are now working to standardize the processes for preparing and purchasing books.

Children's Services. As newly appointed director of the children's services division, Maria Whelan breezed into the office one day carrying a poster with the word “whining” stamped over with the international sign for “no.” She wanted employees to focus on the division's mission to help children through its 110 “delegate agencies”—

nonprofit groups that provide family services. Red tape stifled the division; rules blocked partnerships with the delegate agencies. Centrally located and isolated from day-to-day realities in the field, division employees often interpreted the rules arbitrarily.

Backed by her boss Dan Alvarez, commissioner of human services, Whelan challenged people to discard hierarchical habits. When managers came to her asking what to do, she'd say, “I don't know. What do you think?” Slowly, Whelan's message took hold. In a series of GAP-sponsored focus groups, employees talked about the division's haphazard systems and slow communications. In response, Whelan called an all-staff retreat to work on a strategic plan. The plan called for the division to consider delegate agencies their customers instead of contracted subordinates. The MOE team asked its customers what was important and made a surprising discovery. The agencies wanted two reforms that were at the bottom of the division's own list: more access to training and a more knowledgeable division staff that could provide technical assistance. The team developed a new reporting form to enable the division's specialists—such as nutritionists and facility inspectors—to identify needed assistance accurately and deliver it quickly.

Emboldened, some division employees have identified other challenges and formed two additional teams. Team A is attacking the problem of slow communications. Documents were running a bureaucratic gauntlet with up to 45 different delays so that time-sensitive material often arrived well past its useful date. The team encouraged writers and typists to form production teams. Their redesign cut two days off delivery time. Team B focused on telephone customer service. Calls were bounced around, phones went unanswered, messages didn't reach their destinations, and callers received incorrect information—impeding a critical flow of information between the division and delegate agencies. The team asked its

customers—people who call in and division staff who answer calls—for input. The team also visited the “switchboard” at Motorola. Then, it briefed top city executives on its findings. They immediately approved the team’s recommendations, including new equipment and voice-mail systems. The team compiled new phone procedures in a handbook, along with a calendar of events, for operators and set up information bulletin boards.

More MOE projects

Additional MOE projects are now underway in nine agencies of Chicago’s city and county governments. Twelve MOE teams are working to streamline agency operations and improve the quality of service to the public. The multirank teams reflect the diversity of the government workforce and the need to decentralize decisions and accountability. Team members now see their agencies as businesses that must cut costs and red tape while increasing efficiency and productivity. The work is hard and changes are often painful. But the dividends are a sense of personal accomplishment and new quality of worklife.

Chicago Department of Health. In 1991, the department’s sexually-transmitted-disease clinics turned away 12,000 patients due, in part, to poor procedures. Staff members felt helpless. A MOE team of eight health workers tackled the problem. “We found that a lot of employees weren’t doing the work they were hired for,” says Chris Kosmos, team coleader. Doctors were doing lab work; lab technicians were doing paperwork. And practical nurses spent less than two percent of their time on patient care. By attacking the problem at the procedural level, the team increased patient-care time to 37 percent.

Cook County Central Services. This department, which handles the installation and repair of more than 35,000 phone lines, was swamped. A MOE team found that many work orders were lost, incomplete, or lacked authorization. No system tracked work orders; many arrived on memos, scratch paper, and napkins. The team created a standard request form, banned verbal requests, and set up a system to log

and track orders—cutting processing time from six days to one.

Cook County Hospital. Cook County admits more than 30,000 patients a year. Yet, critical-care units were running out of supplies an average of 44 times a day, with no weekend deliveries. “It was frightening to come in on Monday and find stock levels down to zero,” says MOE team member James Bluemberg. The team set up a pilot program in eight critical-care units. It cut the supply-delivery process from 26 to 14 steps, added Saturday deliveries, printed a supplies catalog, and assigned certain elevators for deliveries. The system is now being extended hospital-wide.

Cook County Purchasing Agent. Before a MOE intervention, the agent’s office issued 8,000 requisitions a year for everything from pencils to surgical equipment to buildings, all manually. In addition, emergency purchases caused by expired contracts cost big money. Within a year, a MOE team helped institute policies, procedures, and a networked computer system to notify contractors in a timely manner.

Chicago Department of Housing. Each year, the department weatherizes more than 3,000 homes, but inspection delays often impede completion. The MOE team automated the tracking system for inspections and established a training house to showcase common weatherization problems.

The Chicago Park District. During the summer of 1993, MOE team members posed as ordinary citizens to register for park-district classes. Then, they charted how much time elapsed between the first contact and actual enrollment. The results ranged from 30 minutes to 120 hours, with more than 100 causes for delay including misprinted course announcements and the practice of having class instructors enroll each participant in person. So, the team designed an informative and inviting flyer with a bilingual registration form. At the test sites, registrations took less than six minutes on average.

Cook County Contract Compliance Office. The office wanted to ensure that a certain percentage of minorities and women gained access to county-generated business opportunities, in compliance with the law. But the MOE team found that notices about contracting opportunities were infrequent and of-

ten mailed too late to be of use. So, the team created a newsletter and a list of prime contacts. Now, minority and women entrepreneurs receive the information they need to prepare bids and identify potential subcontracting opportunities.

Forest Preserve District of Cook County. A MOE survey of county residents revealed that customers of the FPD—which manages 67,000 acres of land and 350 facilities—had one chance in 10 of getting a busy signal, no answer, or being disconnected when they called for information. Even when they got through, callers often received incorrect or outdated information. The MOE team created a resource manual with answers to the most-often asked questions, trained FPD telephone operators, and installed an 800 number. It also recommended a separate department for dealing with customer inquiries.

Cook County Department of Facilities Management. Customers of this agency were frustrated by slow service in the department’s maintenance of 39 buildings. It took an average of 14.7 days for a work order to go through; lesser jobs were put on hold. The MOE team surveyed users of the work-order system and studied a similar private-sector operation. Based on the findings, the team cut the average time for a work order to move through the system to 3.9 days.

In an environment as large as the city of Chicago and Cook County, it takes committed leaders to encourage entrenched employees to break molds—and time and persistence for employee participation to take hold and grow. Says Hollingsworth, “City and county agencies are learning that they can streamline government services to be more responsive, without adding staff or increasing costs.” ■

Catherine Rategan is principal of Writer, 1355 N. Sanburg Terrace, Suite 303, Chicago, IL 60610. Phone: 312/266-8146; e-mail: writerCR@ix.netcom.com. Kenneth O'Hare is principal of Kenneth O'Hare and Associates, 3833 N. Hoyne, Chicago, IL 60618. Phone: 312/296-0010. The article is excerpted from the book Government Works: Profiles of People Making a Difference (Miles River Press).