How to prevent organizational dry rot

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The following article is excerpted from the October, 1965, issue of "Harper's." Mr. Gardner has recently joined the Cabinet as Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare—Ed.

Like people and plants, organizations have a life cycle. They have a green and supple youth, a time of flourishing strength, and a gnarled old age.

But organizations differ from people and plants in that their cycle isn’t even approximately predictable. An organization may go from youth to old age in two or three decades, or it may last for centuries.

More important, it may go through a period of stagnation and then revive. Organizations need not stagnate. Organizations can renew themselves continuously.

The first rule is that the organization must have an effective program for the recruitment and development of talent. The organization must have the kind of recruitment policy that will bring in a steady flow of able and highly motivated individuals.

Encourage Individuality

The second rule for the organization capable of continuous renewal is that it must be a hospitable environment for the individual. Organizations that have killed the spark of individuality in their members will have greatly diminished their capacity for change. Individuals who have been made to feel like cogs in the machine will behave like cogs in the machine. They will not produce ideas for change. On the contrary, they will resist such ideas when produced by others.

The third rule is that the organization must have built-in provisions for self-criticism. It must have an atmosphere in which uncomfortable questions can be asked.

I would lay it down as a basic principle of human organizations that the individuals who hold the reins of power in any enterprise cannot trust themselves to be adequately self-critical. And the only protection is to create an atmosphere in which anyone can speak up.

Fluid Structure

The fourth requirement for the organization that seeks continuous renewal is fluidity of internal structure. Most organizations have a structure that was designed to solve problems that no longer exist.

The fifth rule is that the organization must have an adequate system of internal communication. The enormous potentialities of the human brain are in part explainable in terms of such possibilities for combination and recombination. And such recombination is facilitated by easy communication, impeded by poor communication.

Beware of Rules

The sixth rule: The organization must have some means of combattng the process by which men become prisoners of their procedures. The rule book grows fatter as the ideas grow fewer.

The seventh rule: The organization capable of continuous renewal will have found some means of combating the vested interests that grow up in every human institution.

Nowhere can the operation of vested interests be more clearly seen than in the functioning of university departments. There are exceptions, of course: some departments rise above their vested interests.

Block Reform

But the average department holds like grim death to its piece of intellectual terrain. It teaches its neophytes a jealous devotion to the boundaries of the field. It assases the significance of intellectual questions by the extent to which they can be answered without going outside the sacred territory. Such vested interests effectively block most efforts to reform undergraduate education.

The eighth rule is that the organization capable of continuous renewal is interested in what it is going to become and not what it has been.

Motivation

The ninth rule is obvious, but difficult. An organization runs on motivation, on conviction, on morale. Men have to believe that it really makes a difference whether they do well or badly.

They have to care. They have to believe that their efforts as individuals will mean something for the whole organization, and will be recognized by the whole organization.

Change is always risky, usually uncomfortable, often painful. It isn’t accomplished by apathetic men and women. It requires high motivation to break through the rigidities of the aging organization.