A Sympathetic Organizational Environment—A Key to Developing New Programs

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ABSTRACT: The development of new programs by a recreation and park department may be stimulated either by external pressures or by internal voluntary action. External influences in either a supportive or adversarial way may be exerted by client groups, professional peers, higher levels of government, or elected officials. Internal voluntary action to initiate new programs stems from recognition of performance gaps between what a department is currently achieving and what its managers believe it could achieve. Such gaps emerge from changes in citizen priorities or lifestyles, the shifting of target markets, new technology, a changed financial environment, or the availability of under-utilized resources.

New program ideas flourish best if there is a sympathetic organizational climate to nurture them. Unfortunately, many of the characteristics associated with a supportive climate appear to be the opposite of those frequently found in recreation and park departments. Organizational features characteristic of a sympathetic environment for new program development include an organic, decentralized department staffed by people from diverse backgrounds; availability of slack resources; high employee morale, investment in employee training, and high tolerance of failures; support from elected officials; and support of the department head.

KEYWORDS: New programs, organizational development, organizational climate, recreation and parks.

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Encouraging a continual stream of new programs is a primary managerial task, for it ensures that recreation and park agencies remain relevant. Discussions of new-program development in the recreation and park field have tended to focus exclusively on the technical development and appropriateness of new programs for selected target markets, rather than on the organizational environment needed to nurture them. This focus is unfortunate, because a supportive organizational climate is a prerequisite if new programs are to emerge consistently. This paper commences with a brief overview of stimuli
that lead to the development of new programs. It goes on to discuss organizational characteristics that have been identified as being associated with an inclination to develop new programs.

The term "new" conveys different meanings to different people. One view is that a new program is an invention, something that has never been offered before by anyone. Another view is that a program is new if the department's clientele views it as being new. In this paper the term "new" is used to refer to a program that is offered by an agency to a client group for the first time, even though it may previously have been offered to that client group by other private- or public-sector organizations. This includes completely new programs, modifications of existing programs offered to present client groups, and existing programs offered to new clienteles, regardless of whether or not these programs are similar to those offered by other private or public organizations.

It also includes internal program changes that improve cost efficiency or service effectiveness, even though these changes may not be visible to clients. If, for example, computerization is introduced to register program participants or to schedule maintenance tasks, cost efficiency and/or service effectiveness may improve, yet an agency's clients may not be aware of this change. Such computerization would, nevertheless, represent a new program for the agency. This board view of the term "new" is adopted because any time a program is modified or offered to a new client group, or is new to the agency, the problems inherent in its development and management may be unique. That is, it may present problems and opportunities different from those previously encountered by the agency or others elsewhere.

Sources of Stimuli for Developing New Programs

Momentum for the development of new programs may be initiated either by external influences upon a recreation and park department or from within a department, by voluntary recognition of performance gaps between what an agency is currently achieving and what its managers believe it could and should achieve.

Reaction to External Influences

External influences may be exerted by client groups, professional peers, higher levels of government, or elected officials. These external influences may be supportive and solicited by the agency. Alternatively, these external sources may be discouraged or ignored by agency personnel and consequently may seek to exert pressure in an effort to force an agency to adopt a new program. Citizens' ideas may be volunteered or periodically solicited through the use of needs assessments or focus interviews. Citizen groups that lobby
vigorously may be successful in persuading even reluctant departments to implement particular programs.

Frequent contact with professional peers ensures awareness of new programs that have been introduced elsewhere. Some managers place considerable importance on having their reputations and expertise recognized by professional peers. Such managers may encourage the development of new programs because they perceive that this will aid in establishing their reputations as being progressive and willing to search for innovative ways to effect cost reductions or to improve service delivery.

Sometimes local or state agencies are mandated by the federal government to develop a new program. Federal legislation pertaining to clean air and clean water offers an example of this process. Higher levels of government can also exert external pressure to introduce new services by the use of incentives. The availability of grants such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, or of technical expertise, can be persuasive in enticing local agencies to initiate new programs.

The final source of external pressure is political. If elected officials determine that a particular new program will convince a voting constituency of their progressiveness, sensitivity to client needs, or advocacy for efficiency or better service delivery, then they will seek to convince the department to offer the new program.

**Internal Recognition of Performance Gaps**

Internal momentum for developing new programs is created by voluntary recognition of performance gaps and a department's desire to close them. A performance gap is the difference between what an agency is currently achieving and what its managers believe it could and should achieve.

Performance gaps may emerge from a change in managerial perspective or client expectation. An agency's performance may not change, but a gap may nevertheless emerge because the expectations either of those responsible for its performance or of those receiving its services may change. For example, a new director may perceive substantial performance gaps whereas his or her predecessor was satisfied with the agency's performance.

A more frequent reason for the existence of performance gaps, however, is probably change in environmental conditions. All departments operate in a macroenvironment, that is, the pattern of all external conditions and influences that affect an agency's life and development. Shifts in these dynamic and uncontrollable external forces create performance gaps. It has been found that the greater the degree of environmental uncertainty, the more conscious an agency becomes of performance gaps, and the more likely it is to introduce new programs (Brightman 1981). When the environment is safe and predictable, there is little incentive for introducing new programs. But when the environment is turbulent, departments have to be willing to experiment with new programs; otherwise they become irrelevant and obsolete.

Five major environmental shifts contribute to creating performance gaps. They are demographic changes, changes in lifestyle, new technology, changes
in the financial climate, and the availability of underutilized resources.

*Demographic changes* in the community may create performance gaps that require agencies to modify existing programs for new target markets. For example, responding to the needs of older citizens will become an increasingly important task of recreation and park agencies. Not only is this over-65 target market going to grow in size from 11 percent to 16 percent of the total U.S. population (Bouvier 1980), but it is also likely to become more affluent, more sophisticated about leisure use and more politically demanding, requiring that it be given increased priority.

Frequently, new programs emerge because department personnel recognize *changes in the lifestyles* of client groups. Interest in youth soccer programs in the 1970s, increased interest in home crafts and "do-it-yourself" programs, and the influx of females and older people into aerobics, jogging, bicycling, and physical fitness in general have all presented opportunities for many departments to provide new programs for existing clientele and to modify programs for new client groups.

*New technology* and inventions may facilitate the development of new programs. The introduction of windsurfing, video games, synthetic playing surfaces, wave machines, and skateboards with polyurethane wheels has created opportunities for the successful introduction of new recreation and park programs.

*The more stringent financial climate* of the 1980s has encouraged some agencies to invest in new services that offer potential for revenue production in order to reduce tax support. A county board of supervisors, for example, requested its parks director to develop a series of new programs that would cut the county's tax support for parks each year, until after seven years it would fall to zero. They provided a 10 cent property tax for this seven-year period, which was to be used for the acquirement, development, and promotion of the additional revenue-producing facilities needed to offset the losses incurred by conventional park operations (Howard and Crompton 1980). Similarly, the city of Dallas proposed major capital improvements to its zoo in order to reduce annual operating costs substantially.

*The availability of underutilized resources* is sometimes the stimulus for developing new programs. One source of such resources may be large fluctuations in demand. Public schools exemplify such fluctuation; they are used for only seven hours per day, five days per week, nine months per year. In many cases these facilities are idle for the remaining seventeen hours per day, on weekends, and during summers. This fact has served as a stimulus for some school districts to permit recreation and park departments to use their facilities in order to demonstrate better use of these resources to taxpayers.

**Characteristics of a Sympathetic Organizational Environment**

There appears to be considerable agreement in the literature regarding the organizational characteristics that tend to be associated with an inclination to develop new programs. Unfortunately, many of these appear to be the
opposite of those most frequently found in recreation and park departments. These characteristics are summarized in Fig. 1 and discussed under five headings in the following paragraphs: organizational structure, availability of organizational slack, personnel treatment, support from elected officials, and support of the agency head.

CHARACTERISTICS WHICH DETERMINE THE AGENCY CLIMATE FOR NEW PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

**TENDS TO FACILITATE NEW PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

**TENDS TO INHIBIT NEW PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Organic → Mechanistic
Decentralized → Centralized
Different perspectives → Similar perspectives

**AVAILABILITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL SLACK**

Slack resources available → No slack resources available
Agency expanding → Agency contracting

**PERSONNEL TREATMENT**

High employee morale → Low employee morale
High tolerance of failures → Low tolerance of failures
Investment in employee training → No investment in employee training

**SUPPORT FROM ELECTED OFFICIALS**

Supportive → Not supportive

**SUPPORT OF THE AGENCY HEAD**

Supportive → Not supportive

Figure 1

Organizational Structure

Positive environments for new program development tend to exist when departments are organic, decentralized, and staffed by people from diverse backgrounds.
Organic departments are loosely structured, and encouraged openness and frequent interaction between colleagues and participation in the decision process. They are characterized by a maximum of individual discretion and a minimum of subjection to higher authority. In contrast, a mechanistic agency is multi-tiered, with senior management, remote from contact with the community, making all decisions. Such an agency tends to be depersonalized, rigid, and centralized, with emphasis placed on following specified rules and procedures set down for performing tasks in the organization.

Organic organizations have been found to be more responsive to new program stimuli than those which are mechanistic (Burns and Stalker 1961). Many recreation and park departments, however, tend to fit the description of a mechanistic organization, which means that their development of new programs is likely to be inhibited.

Centralization of authority stifles new-program development because it incorporates too many checks and balance points that have to be surmounted. New programs are likely to be approved at different levels within a recreation and parks department, depending upon a program's impact on the operation of a particular unit and the magnitude of the resources to be invested. Clearly the more time and effort needed to gain permission from those in positions of higher authority, the less incentive there is to invest in the procedure.

Decentralization offers greater autonomy and local responsibility, which in turn provides fewer obstacles and more incentives for developing new programs. The trend toward decentralization exemplified by the recent reorganizations of large recreation and park departments such as those in Dallas, San Diego, Los Angeles County, the city of Los Angeles, and Phoenix is likely to encourage the development of new programs.

Larger size and more rapid growth have frequently been associated with a proclivity to introduce new programs (Walker and Chaiken 1981); however, this may be misleading. Researchers who have reported this relationship tend to agree that size and growth are most likely to be proxies for other factors, particularly the availability of slack resources, discussed in the following section.

Certainly greater size may ensure availability of the "critical mass" of personnel necessary to stimulate and foster new programs. Increased size permits more specialization. If a department is large and/or growing it is better able to add new specialties and new functions, which tend to lead to the introduction of more new programs. Conversely, if a department is contracting it tends to increase centralization and focus less on new programs. Further, if no new people are hired, then fewer new ideas from the outside are likely to enter the department.

In many instances, however, the assets of size and slack resources are nullified because an agency is bureaucratic and mechanistic. Smaller departments often have the advantage of being more organic, with less red tape and fewer levels of management. In the private sector, the ability of small organizations to develop new products has been consistently documented: "To an amazing extent, major new products incorporating new technology have
It is unfortunate that some elected officials and high level administrators have failed to distinguish "fat" and "slack." Their challenge is to remove the fat, but to keep the slack. Some have failed to recognize this and have removed both, which is the long term will reduce a department's efficiency.

**Personnel Treatment**

Optimism and psychological security are important in encouraging innovation (Thompson 1976). It has been argued that a department can only successfully implement a new activity if there is high employee morale (Hage and Aiken 1967). Several studies have related high staff morale to organizational innovativeness (Walker and Chaiken 1981). People who are satisfied with their jobs are more committed to the organization: consequently, they are more receptive to new ideas for improving a department's services.

A department's treatment of its personnel with regard to new programs may foster or inhibit their development. Although data are not available for recreation and park departments or for other public-sector agencies, estimates of the proportion of new products and services that fail in the private sector range from 35 to over 90 percent (Crawford 1979). The wide variation can be attributed to the surveys addressing diverse industries at different times and using different definitions of failure. These failures occur despite the substantial investment in research that typically is made before products and services are launched. Given these data, it should be regarded as inevitable that many new programs offered by recreation and park departments will fail.

Mistakes and failures must be anticipated, accepted, and not unreasonably penalized if an organizational climate that encourages new programs is to be fostered. This does not mean that sloppy work, poor planning and implementation, or incompetence should be excused; it simply means that risk is inherent in new program development and some failures are inevitable.

Many recreation and park managers are averse to taking the risks inherent in new offerings because the personal cost of failure is often judged to be greater than the gains accruing from success. The analytical basis for this asymmetry is provided by the following rationale:

Where there is only limited external pressure for improved performance, there may also be real negative incentives against undertaking innovations that may improve performance but which also involve some risk. For example, a department director who uses standard procedures is unlikely to be criticized for not innovating; if he or she does undertake nonstandard procedures to improve performance, there may be little reward. Furthermore, if something goes wrong with a nonstandard procedure, the director may find him- or herself without a job. The inability to appropriate gains from improving efficiency, combined with the high risk of mistakes, does not provide top officials with incentives to try to improve performance. (Adapted from Bish and Nourse 1975)

The difficulty of evaluating recreation and park programs has frequently been noted (Hatry et al. 1977). This impediment means that failures to deliver anticipated cost savings or effectiveness improvements are often difficult to detect. Ironically, the lack of effective evaluation tools in this field may encourage innovative managers because their new program failures may escape general notice.
been brought to market by new (and therefore presumably small) companies, rather than by those (presumably large) companies with large investments in fundamental research” (Riggs 1980: 12).

In a large, mechanistic department, new ideas may have to be approved by several levels of superiors before they are fully developed. Since it is often difficult to defend them adequately in the early stages of development, they tend to be rejected. Further, developing a new program may imply that resources have to be taken from an existing program. In large departments this is more likely to lead to resistance because there are more people who may fear losing the resources under their control to a new program.

A department with a greater diversity of backgrounds among its personnel is more likely to generate new program ideas. If personnel have similar backgrounds, it can induce what psychologists call “functional myopia”—a tendency to view the department, and its opportunities and problems from the same set of reference points and perspectives. Differences in background, on the other hand, stimulate constructive conflict between individuals with different backgrounds and cross-fertilization of ideas (Brightman 1981). This suggests that departments should (1) hire park and recreation graduates from a variety of institutions, and (2) hire personnel who have been trained in related disciplines outside the park and recreation field such as computer science, physical education, fine arts, social work, and business studies.

Availability of Organizational Slack

Organizational slack is the difference between the resources committed by a department to carry out its basic functions and the total resources it has available (Walker and Chaiken 1981). It is difficult for a department to develop new programs if it is fully extended, applying all of its resources to carry out existing commitments and solve today’s problems. Without slack, in terms of uncommitted staff time, expertise, or money, it is unlikely that new programs will consistently emerge.

Organizational slack influences whether or not an agency can afford the resource costs associated with developing new programs:

The existence of slack means that the organization can afford to (1) purchase costly innovations, (2) absorb failures, (3) bear the costs of implementing the innovation, and (4) explore new ideas in advance of an actual need (Rosner 1968: 614).

Slack resources that are deliberately made available to foster new programs are not symptomatic of an inefficient organization; rather they are an indication of enlightened, forward-thinking, proactive management.

Slack may be created by retrenchment efforts that release resources from existing programs. Alternatively, it may be obtained by lowering service delivery expectations. Reducing expectations enables performance levels to be lowered; resources can then be released from existing offerings. One way this is being achieved is by moving from the traditional direct-provider role to a facilitator role. In the past, resources from federal and state governments, whether provided annually or on a one-time basis, have provided some slack for local agencies.
Consistent investment in employee training is a key ingredient in creating a sympathetic organizational climate for new-program development. The availability of appropriate expertise is likely to influence the enthusiasm with which personnel suggest new programs. If expertise is not currently available, the agency must be prepared to invest in the training necessary to enable personnel confidently to operate the program.

Support from Elected Officials

The requirement that elected officials be reelected after a short period in office is likely to influence the fate of relatively large new-program proposals. This influence may be supportive or adverse. The program life cycle concept suggests that there may be a lead time before a new program realizes its full potential (Howard and Crompton 1980). This may deter some officials from supporting major new programs since they will incur the adverse political impacts associated with the high start-up costs of a program, while the benefits accruing from it are reaped by their successors. On the other hand, investment in major new facilities may stimulate the local economy during the official’s term of office (Feller 1981). Political gain may be greatest during the construction phase of a project when construction activity provides tangible and visible signs of “progress” and officials receive the benefits associated with being “doers.”

The conclusions of a study of new programs introduced in a variety of fields in a major city are informative:

The lesson is clear from the cases: innovation usually costs money. In the long run, it may save money or produce such user benefits worth the added operating costs. However, since local politicians react primarily to immediate pressures, administrative entrepreneurs are advised to find ways to shift costs upward, forward—or “under the rug.” (Lambright, Teich, and Carroll 1977)

Some elected officials may abide by the old aphorism, “If you do nothing you’ll be elected forever, because you won’t make mistakes.” Generally, there is likely to be less political risk associated with rejecting a new-program proposal than with accepting it, for the risk associated with failure may be high while the gains associated with success may be low.

Support of the Agency Head

Innovation is needed from personnel at all levels in an agency, but as an individual moves into higher levels of management the responsibility for encouraging the development of new programs increases. Empirical studies repeatedly suggest that strong, visible support by top leadership is the most important factor in fostering an organizational climate that facilitates innovative endeavors (Zaltman, Duncan, and Holbek 1973; Walker and Chaiken 1981).

A director’s role is particularly crucial in mechanistic agencies. If the head of such an agency creates a favorable organizational environment, and is perceived by others to be personally committed to supporting the development of innovative projects, then new programs are likely to be regularly
implemented. On the other hand, a non-innovative agency head can stymie all new-program development.

Too often recreation and park directors accumulate a host of routine "maintenance" activities. It is essential that these be periodically purged by delegation, because they occupy time which should be committed to the strategic planning of new directions and new programs. An effective agency can carry on the routine of its day-to-day activity without the constant involvement of its director. Herbert Simon, one of the most influential management thinkers of recent times, is adamant in emphasizing that the primary responsibility of an agency's chief executive "is not for the organization's routine operation but for its modification to meet changing demands and opportunities in its environment. . . . The chief executive's task . . . is to provide for genuine innovative change in the organization's programs" (Simon 1962:66).

Concluding Comments

The concern in this paper has been to encourage recreation and park agencies to develop an organizational capacity that will encourage new programs and change, and will release the imaginations of their personnel so that agencies effervesce with ideas.

A number of reasons suggest that departments should place increased emphasis upon developing such an organizational environment. They include the increased emphasis upon being sensitive to client wants; a growing concern with accountability; the shorter life-cycle of programs caused by more rapid change in client priorities; the high rate of new-program failures; and the long lead time that may be involved from the initial suggestion of an idea to its implementation.

The paper has discussed the stimuli responsible for initiating new programs and has identified the organizational characteristics necessary to nurture new programs to fruition. In the past, emphasis has been confined to developing new-program ideas, but this presumes a sympathetic organizational environment that encourages the development of new programs.

Discussion of the importance of organizational climate to new-program development, formulating new directions, and innovation is particularly germane at this time. Financial exigencies have caused recreation and park agencies to be confronted with new problems. The need for emergency problem solving creates an atmosphere conducive to short-term change. This is frequently accompanied, however, by long-term costs that can reduce the organization's capacity to foster a continual stream of new programs. Consider the following actions and their consequences:

* Hiring freezes, which inhibit the infusion of new ideas and different perspectives that new personnel bring to a department. Frequently, it is staff rather than line positions that are primarily targeted for reductions because some of those positions can be vacated without adversely affecting existing service delivery. Unfortunately, those in staff positions are (or
should be) primarily responsible for introducing major innovations and directional changes into the agency.

* Salary freezes and reductions in existing work force, which adversely affect morale.

* Reduction in travel and training budgets, which are likely to reduce opportunities for personnel to be exposed to new programs being implemented elsewhere.

* Refusal by elected officials or senior administrators to propose tax increases even when analyses demonstrate that failure to do so will lead to the incurring of substantially greater costs later. The costs incurred by "deferred maintenance" are a common example of this.

All of these actions are commonly being implemented in the park and recreation field. They may be successful in resolving immediate problems; in the long term, however, it is possible that they will only compound a department's problems because each of these actions militates against the creation of the sympathetic organizational environment an agency needs to nurture a continual stream of new programs, which are essential if it is to remain efficient and relevant.

REFERENCES


