When Roger Briggs started working for the State of California in 1975, with the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Board, he was a freshly-minted engineer with a bachelor’s and master’s degree from the University of California, Berkeley. His first assignment was to work in the ‘Requirements, Permits and Grants’ section in the small and informal regional office. The organizational chart from June 1975, done with typewriter and straight-edge, attested to the casual atmosphere in the office; no one’s title was referenced in any of the boxes and reporting relationships were not entirely clear.

“In theory,” Briggs recalls 34 years later, as the Executive Officer for the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Board, “we were responsible for 11,000 square miles of California watershed. In reality, however, most of our work was issuing permits to municipal and industrial waste water facilities in our region, inspecting those facilities, collecting some data and enforcing our permits. There were no personal computers in 1975, so everything was done manually. The pace was slower back then. On the other hand, we learned to write letters in one draft for the typists, since re-typing other drafts was a luxury we couldn’t afford.”

A few years after Briggs joined the regional water quality board, the Executive Officer, Ken Jones, sent some tremors throughout the small office by appointing Briggs as the ‘lead’ in the Grants unit and then promoted him to Senior Engineer, making Briggs the youngest senior engineer in the state. A few years later, when Ken Jones decided he was going to retire, he announced that the Assistant Executive Officer (AEO) at the time, Bill Leonard, was going to take his position. Then he and Leonard sent shock waves through the now larger office by promoting Briggs to AEO, even though Briggs was the junior and least experienced of all the candidates. Almost overnight, Briggs became the supervisor for those who used to supervise him.

“It was a little awkward at first,” Briggs recalls, “but it never occurred to me to question Ken or Bill’s judgment or decision. I looked at it as a great opportunity and hoped that they knew what they were doing in selecting me for a higher leadership position.”

Perhaps what Ken Jones saw in his young employee was courage—the willingness to take on tough assignments, especially when the way forward was not clear or easy.
In 1995, the Unocal Corporation (previously known as the Union Oil Company of California) sold all of its California holdings to Torch Energy Advisors, Inc., a Houston-based, privately-held company, for an undisclosed amount. Three Unocal properties, however, were not part of the transaction. The Guadalupe oil field, near the small town of Guadalupe, California, about 30 miles south of San Luis Obispo; the San Luis Obispo tank farm; and, the Port San Luis facility, in Avila Beach, a small beach community just south of San Luis Obispo, were not part of the deal because they were still being investigated for cleanup by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Board at the time of the sale. That investigation had started several years prior, in the late 1980’s.

The technical term for the ecological catastrophe that was the Guadalupe oil field was ‘underground diluent leaks’. Diluent is kerosene-diesel. What the term of art does not disclose, however, was that Unocal’s oil leak near Guadalupe was comparable in size to the Exxon Valdez spill in Prince William Sound, and twice as big as Unocal’s famous blowout at Platform A in the Santa Barbara Channel in 1969.

A few staff in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, including Michael Thomas and Richard Aleshire, began to think there was something suspicious about Unocal’s denial that their Guadalupe oil field was the source of sporadic oil sheens in the surf zone near the field. In 1989, Thomas, along with staff from the County of San Luis Obispo and the State of California’s Department of Fish & Game, convinced Unocal to install monitoring wells for the first time, which revealed a massive diluents plume floating on shallow groundwater near the beach and one specific oil production well. Unocal described the plume as an ‘anomaly’ and resisted further investigation. Tenacious water board staff, however, found that a couple of leaks in the diluent distribution system had caused accumulated oil in the sands near the beach. When Thomas reported this information to his EO (executive officer), the EO instructed him to not pursue additional requirements of Unocal. The AEO (Briggs), however, did not agree with the EO and encouraged the work to continue, albeit with a lower profile.

Water Board staff, and the Department of Fish and Game’s (DFG) Dutch Huckaby, worked collaboratively for several years to investigate leads that didn’t fit Unocal’s description of the problem. It wasn’t until 1992 that all the pieces in the puzzle could be put together. The turning point was a search warrant raid on the Unocal Guadalupe Oil Field Office that same year.

Briggs (then the Assistant Executive Officer) and Huckaby knocked on the door of the Unocal office, yelling, “Search warrant, we’re coming in.” Upon entering the office, Briggs and Huckaby pulled down box after box of files from the attic space above the work area. One of the key pieces of evidence, the proverbial smoking gun, was a Unocal map with annotations of leak and spill locations, collected over several years, for the entire oil field. These were leaks that Unocal documented, and to which they applied band-aid fixes, while telling the regulators that they knew of no such leaks. After the search warrant raid, Unocal’s story of denials crumbled under the weight of evidence.

Working with the San Luis Obispo district attorney’s office on criminal charges, the Unocal Corporation, along with six of its employees, pleaded no contest, were fined, and put on probation. The probation was conditioned on the regional board’s satisfaction with Unocal’s progress on site remediation, and with Briggs providing probation reports to the court twice a year. Briggs, who by this time had been appointed by the regional board to be the Executive Officer, was authorized by the Regional Water Board to sign the Cleanup and Abatement Order, which was part of a settlement that required not only continued Unocal cleanup actions, but a payment of $43M to settle Unocal’s liability for damages to the environment.

During these legal joustings, other water board staff were working on the extensive cleanup oversight responsibilities for the oil field. The diluent was very resistant to removal by conventional methods. Some water board staff thought that the entire site would need to be excavated. Others argued that such draconian measures would destroy the dunes, and its unique flora and fauna, with little water quality benefit. Some of these debates were heated.

One weekend morning, while Briggs was going for a run down the street from his home, he was mulling over this problem (that verged on a dilemma). During the run, it suddenly dawned on Briggs that both schools of thought were right, but they were location dependent. What he decided was that the site should be triaged, with those individual diluent plumes that were affecting or threatening surface water (the river, the beach, vernal pools) having to be excavated, while pursuing less invasive and drastic cleanup means (including researching methods) for those plumes that were not immediately threatening those waters. Fifteen years later, the oil field cleanup continues using the same location-dependent strategy.

Despite pleading guilty to the district attorney’s charges in 1994, Unocal did not meet the terms of the court’s settlement, and Briggs’ probation reports to the court confirmed as much. Unocal filed papers with the court, arguing that it had not violated the probation terms,
and the scene was set for a courtroom showdown. On the Saturday before the Monday morning court date, Unocal’s site manager called Briggs at home and they discussed what Unocal could do to make things right, and what the water board could do differently to help resolve the conflict. After a lengthy discussion, the two decided to try a formal facilitated meeting process, using an outside professional facilitator. After ending the call, Briggs typed up a basic outline of this process on his home computer and brought the printout to the courthouse steps on Monday morning, when all the attorneys were present. Both parties agreed to the terms of the new process, with Unocal agreeing to provide the money for the facilitator through an escrow account controlled by the water board.

While the Guadalupe site had elements of a TV docudrama, the Avila Beach site provided a different kind of drama. Beneath this small beach town, Unocal’s pipelines had discharged tens of thousands of gallons crude oil, diesel, and gasoline, creating health, environmental, and property risks. Avila Beach had been a Unocal oil town for a century. Until the late 1990s, Avila Beach had served as the port for oil fields in both Santa Maria and the Central Valley. Oil was loaded by pipeline on to tankers and shipped to refineries in Los Angeles and Contra Costa County. Refined product was shipped to the Avila port and then trucked to the retailing stations.

The main hydrocarbon plume in Avila stretched for approximately a quarter of a mile beneath residential homes, businesses, and the adjacent beach. While many residents favored excavation, some were unsure whether the impact of the cleanup was worse than the impact of the leaking pipelines. The pipeline leak negatively impacted property values, but a cleanup would alter the quality of life in town, turning Avila into an excavation project site for almost two years, and result in a very different Avila Beach upon its completion. Briggs and his staff were challenged with making the case for cleanup urgency and beneficial outcome to the Avila community, while working a commitment for quality cleanup out of Unocal. Making that case for the town area turned out to be easier because Briggs previously ordered an emergency cleanup of a finger of the plume that the cutting action of the creek was threatening to release to the creek and ocean. That successful excavation provided a visual realization of what was actually underground, throughout the contaminated area, rather than just benign looking data on a map, and it demonstrated cleanup feasibility.

The State (Fish and Game and the Central Coast Regional Board) joined a lawsuit against Unocal, initiated by local citizens, in an effort to force cleanup. Jennifer Soloway (Regional Board attorney) and Ken Alex (Deputy Attorney General) and the Regional Board negotiated a settlement that required excavation in compliance with the Regional Board’s specific cleanup goals.

John Robertson, a section manager for the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Board (CCRWQB), joined the organization in 1998, after working in both environmental consulting and for another regional board. “I remember thinking, when I got here in 1998 and learned about the details of both the Unocal Guadalupe and Avila Beach cleanup efforts,” Robertson recalls, “that staff in this region did not duck the fight and choose the path of least resistance. It took a lot of courage and a lot of energy to persist against Unocal and achieve the cleanups we now see at both sites.

“I remember thinking that I relished the opportunity to work on these types of challenging, complex projects, and in an environment where following the path of least resistance wasn’t the unspoken direction, wasn’t the organization’s culture.”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

When Roger Briggs was promoted to senior, as the youngest and least experienced eligible person in his office, and the youngest in the state, and then had a similar situation when he became Assistant Executive Officer, he would have faced a set of challenges. What do you think those challenges would have been? If you have faced similar challenges in your career, how did you meet them?

Roger Briggs was not the first person to know about the potential catastrophe in Guadalupe. While some fellow staff members were suspicious, others in the regional office, including the executive officer (EO), tended to believe Unocal’s claims of minimal problems, and therefore took minimal actions. What do you think motivated their response? What do you think motivated Briggs, Thomas, and Aleshire to act against Unocal, even when their EO pursued a more cooperative approach? No Water Board employee had ever before participated in serving a search warrant, much less against a multi-billion dollar corporation. What motivated Briggs, Thomas and Aleshire to break from the norm? If you answer, “courage motivated them,” discuss how you think a person comes by ‘courage’ in their life.

Briggs went on to become the EO for the CCRWQB in 1994, once again being selected over others who had more seniority and experience, just as had happened previously. How do you think people advance in their careers in state service?
In 1994, Roger Briggs became the Executive Officer (EO) for the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board. Over the nineteen years between first being hired as an engineer, and becoming EO, Briggs had thought a lot about what his organization should focus on. Now, as the person at the top of the organizational chart, he had an opportunity to transform his ideas into reality.

“I had a mantra that everyone in the office heard repeatedly,” Briggs laughs as he thinks about those early days as EO, “and it went like this: ‘what have you done today to improve water quality?’ Fifteen years later, his face lights up when he talks about an email he got from one of his supervisors a couple years back.

“He wrote to me and said, “Roger, attached is the presentation I gave at the TMDL [Total Maximum Daily Load] training. Check out the last bullet in the second to the last slide.” In that slide the last bullet point read: “What have you done to improve water quality today?” It was verbatim from an email that Briggs had sent out to his staff in 1998. The supervisor added, “This is still the measure of success I use for myself. Thanks.” And it was confirmation to Briggs that the changes he wanted to bring about in the regional water quality control board really were having a lasting effect.

“As an engineer,” Briggs offers, “I think a lot about sustainability, how to make things last. I think change can be sustained in an organization only when it is gradual and evolutionary. If change is going to last, it’s going to take time.” Pausing to reflect, Briggs adds, “When Art Coe, the AEO [Assistant Executive Officer] in San Diego, retired, he counseled all of us to ‘remember, we’re not in a sprint; we’re in a marathon.’”

From Briggs’ perspective, changing an organization’s culture is a long, slow and often arduous task, accomplished by making lots and lots of little changes. “One of the first things I did differently from the previous EO,” Briggs says, “is that I told people, ‘don’t come to my office with problems, come with solutions.’” Briggs smiles, then goes on to add, “in retrospect, that little change was actually quite big, in terms of changing the culture. There’s an unfair assumption, but sometimes nonetheless accurate description, that civil servants only know how to point out problems, not solve them. I wanted to change that perception. More importantly, I wanted our staff to develop their own skills in decision making and leadership, for their benefit as well as our organization’s effectiveness. The staff has a lot more brain power than I’ve got, and we need to realize that potential.”

Some of the changes in the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, over the past 15 years while Briggs has been EO, were indeed small. Some, however, were huge. And while a few people in the office remember Briggs’ email about doing something every day for water quality, everyone remembers when he appointed Michael Thomas the Assistant Executive Officer (AEO) in early 2005.

“Toward the end of 2004,” Briggs recalls, “we changed the classification for the AEO position from a senior supervising engineer to CEA [Career Executive Appointment], which meant I could appoint anyone to the position.” It was a change that sent small shock waves throughout the regional office.

Lisa McCann, a section manager with the regional office, recalls, “at the time I thought, ‘hmmm, that’s an interesting decision. I wonder what Roger and the board are thinking?’ It was a complete surprise when Roger appointed Michael, because he was not a senior engineer or a supervisor at the time. He was line staff, and part-time at that. He had previously been in an acting-Supervising position, but he’d only been in that role a little more than a year.”

When Briggs appointed Thomas as AEO, there were several people above him in the organizational chart. “It was a bombshell at the time,” McCann offers, “and it got everyone talking: what is Roger up to?”

The precedent for appointing someone in a junior position to AEO actually began with Briggs himself, almost two decades earlier, when he was appointed AEO above two other people in the office with more ‘time in the position’ or seniority than him. “At age 35, I was the junior of three seniors who were eligible in-house to become AEO, and probably the junior of all outside candidates as well,” Briggs recalls, “so, it surprised everyone, including me, when I was selected by the retiring EO and the new EO.”
In a public-sector organization like the State of California’s Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, elevating a line staff to the position of Assistant Executive Officer breaks all kinds of precedents and assumptions. Changing the job classification makes it possible, but it doesn’t make it easy.

More than four years later, a few in the regional office still don’t agree with Briggs’ decision to appoint Thomas as AEO. “What kind of a signal does it send,” asks an engineer who has spent his entire career working in the regional office, “when a technical line staff gets promoted over a lot of other people already in management?” Pausing to collect his thoughts, he adds, “a lot of ambitious people moved on when that decision was made.”

“I wasn’t interested in the position myself,” adds another long-time employee, “but it seemed to me that the decision was made behind closed doors, in secret. I remember thinking, when we heard about the decision to appoint Michael, ‘you can’t do that … when you work for the state, that kind of stuff isn’t supposed to happen.”

“And here’s a perfect example of why you don’t have people just jump over other people,” he continues, “the first decision Michael made was to assign window seats in the office to people based upon ‘performance’ and not seniority. Talk about making things political … well, that decision didn’t last long! But you know what, the organization really has changed since Roger became EO … we’ve become more effective. Now we ask, ‘if there’s a problem, how do we deal with it?’”

“I’ve been here over ten years,” a scientist working in the regional office speaks up, “and when Michael was appointed AEO, all I could think was, ‘Oh great, here we go again!’ To say that I was skeptical is an understatement. But it’s funny: I’ve really changed my thinking this last year. For nine years, I thought about my work here as ‘a job’: I came to the office, did my work, and got a paycheck. But in this last year, I’ve gotten more engaged. I now come to work and ask myself, ‘how can I be more effective?’”

The skepticism expressed in the saying, “here we go again,” is not restricted to public-sector employees; indeed, the exact same sentiment is often expressed in private-sector companies where employees talk about, “keeping their heads down,” because, “this, too, shall pass.” Something different, however, was happening in the office of the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board. To be sure, there were some who rolled their eyes and agreed, “here we go again.” But not everyone shared that sentiment.

One young engineer assessed the situation this way, “there were two attitudes in the office. Some were skeptical and said, ‘here we go again …’ Others said, ‘hey, this is the way we should have been doing it all along—this is great!”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

When Roger Briggs named Michael Thomas as the Assistant Executive Officer (AEO), it created both opportunities and challenges for Briggs. In your group, identify what opportunities his decision created for Briggs, as well as how you think he should take advantage of those opportunities. Identify, as well, the challenges or risks that Thomas’ appointment as AEO created for both Briggs and Thomas, and how you think each should defend against those challenges/risks.

Although Briggs appointed Thomas, the Board stood behind Briggs’ decision. When Briggs appointed Thomas as AEO, the decision created risk for everyone: the board (i.e., its individual members), Briggs, and Thomas. If your group was advising the water board on its ‘risk profile’ for appointing a new AEO, what advice would you give? Put another way, how would you categorize and evaluate the risks in Briggs’ decision?
Act III

"The turning point for me," Michael Thomas reflects, "was when I realized that projects can be engineered, but organizations can’t. What I mean by that idea is the belief that every organization, even an organization of engineers, needs good leadership to be successful. But the problem is, no one learns how to be a leader when they’re studying to be an engineer or a scientist."

“As engineers and scientists,” Thomas continues, “we all learned the idea that our disciplines improve only when we make mistakes and then learn from those mistakes. But no one wants to make mistakes—or at least own up to the mistakes—in order to learn from them. And yet leadership, it seems to me, is all about trying things and then figuring out what worked, and what didn’t, and then trying to learn from those things that didn’t work.”

“Like most people,” Thomas muses, “I thought leaders had all the answers, and their job was to tell people what to do. But the longer I’m in this role, the more convinced I become that my real job is to ask good questions, instead of providing answers, and that is really, really hard!”

“I took a leadership course several years ago,” Thomas recalls, “and we read a Harvard Business Review article called, ‘The Work of Leadership’, by Ronald Heifetz, a psychiatrist who teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. And in the article, Heifetz writes about ‘giving work back’, which means not solving people’s problems, but instead giving them the ability and encouragement to solve their own problems. It means, of course, that we have to learn new ways of dealing with disagreement and conflict, and that’s hard.”

“But hard doesn’t mean impossible,” Thomas continues, “it just means hard … for example, around here we talk about expecting disagreement, and not resisting it, and instead of resisting, listening … and anyone who knows much about human nature knows that listening is really, really hard.”

Looking back at those first several months in the position,” Thomas offers, “I now realize that I confused ‘technical’ problems with management ‘dilemmas’.

“Of course, when I moved into the AEO position,” Thomas laughs, “I didn’t know the difference between a technical problem and a management dilemma … and I sure didn’t recognize that what I was really trying to do was change the organization’s culture. And to top it all off, I had no idea that the real changes needed to occur in me first, and then the organization. In that respect, I was like most leaders: I mistakenly thought my job was to tell other people how to change, without recognizing that if I wanted others to change, I had to change first.”

“I knew things were changing in the office, before Michael got appointed AEO,” offers a long-time staff member, “but things really got kicked into a higher gear when he did. Some of his early decisions didn’t work—like the idea of assigning window seats based upon performance, instead of seniority—but some of his other ideas have been very successful. One, in particular, is important to me, as a long-time employee, and that’s the effort to create what I would call a ‘culture of excellence’ here. I know Roger has always been interested in us doing good work, but Michael has been relentless in pushing us to ask, ‘what are our priorities?’ and, ‘are we achieving them?’ and, ‘are our priorities consistent with our vision and goals?’ And here’s something else: Michael’s also very interested in work-life balance for all of us. And what’s so interesting, and what I am curious about, is that as our productivity has gone up, so has our concern for each other’s work-life balance. A few years ago, I would have told you that you have to choose between productivity and work-life balance, and you can’t have both. But these last few years have proven just the opposite: we’ve become more productive and we’ve got better work-life balance.”

In a large, state-wide organization like the water boards, it is not uncommon for people to move between regional offices, as well as back-and-forth between the regional offices and the State Water Board office in Sacramento. “When I got to Sacramento, I felt very lucky,” offers an engineer, reflecting on his decision to leave the state board for the regional water board in San Luis Obispo, “because the region where I worked was pretty chaotic and stressful. But not long after arriving in Sacramento, I began hearing about the new AEO in Region 3 and it sounded pretty exciting, what he was trying to do to become a performance-based organization. So, I began to pay attention to the job
Then a listing came up that I was interested in, so I applied, and I made it to the first-round of phone interviews. And it was in that first phone interview that I knew something really different was going on in Region 3, because none of the questions were about technical, engineering problems. In fact, the very first question was asked by Michael Thomas, which I thought was kind of weird, to have an AEO on a first-round interview panel, and he said, ‘what’s your theory of leadership?’ I was totally unprepared for that question, so I sort of stumbled through an answer, expecting the next questions to be the real questions, about things like … well … engineering!

“But the next question was also about ‘leadership’ … and the next, and the next, and the next. At first it made me really uncomfortable, trying to answer those questions, but after a while, the questions started to excite me, because I realized they were really trying to do something different in Region 3.

“So, when I was called back for a second interview, this time in person, I half-way expected that the questions would now focus on engineering, since it was a senior engineer position that I was interviewing for … but I was totally wrong: it was another round of questions about leadership. When I drove down to San Luis Obispo, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to leave Sacramento. When I drove home after the interview, I knew I really wanted the job, and I just hoped it would be offered to me.

“When I got the job offer, I didn’t hesitate to say, ‘yes’. Now, I’m old enough to know that no job is ever perfect, and every workplace has its problems, but the truth is, I’ve never worked any place where I’ve been this enthusiastic about what I do and the people I work with. Around here we talk about working on ‘higher-order problems’, as a measure of our success, instead of eliminating problems. I didn’t realize, before coming here, that trying to eliminate problems in the workplace is not just impossible, it’s also the wrong goal.

“If I had to boil it down to one sentence, here’s how I would explain the changes we’re trying to make in Region 3: if we want to improve water quality, we have to improve our organization; and, if we want to improve our organization, we have to improve ourselves; and, if we want to improve ourselves, we have to improve our self-awareness and our self-mastery.”

“Look, I’ve been here all my career,” offers a long-time employee, “and this place has been like my family, but when Roger promoted Michael to AEO, I just scratched my head and said, ‘What …?!’ And now I’m thinking, ‘when can I retire?’

“I’m just ‘staff’ because I never wanted to be ‘management’. And even if I ever wanted to be a supervising engineer, I sure wouldn’t want to be one now. It’s really changed around here, it more urban now, and that’s change I can’t believe in!

“Michael’s always talking about how we can work with people, even if we don’t like them, but I think that’s naive. Nobody wants to work with people they don’t like, it’s just too stressful. I just wish Michael understood that.”

“I think what Michael has done, since becoming AEO, is give us permission to think,” a senior project leader offers, “actually, that’s not exactly right; no, what he’s done is not give us permission to think, so much as encouragement to think. Maybe even more importantly, however, he wants to know what we think. He wants to know how we see things. He wants to know what we’re paying attention to, what we’re listening for … not to correct us, so much as to get a better understanding of what our ‘mental models’ are. And his curiosity is infectious: it makes us more curious about what we really think about things, as well as what we think about other people.

“I haven’t thought about it this way before, but what he’s taught me is how important it is to listen. And because he listens carefully to me, I find myself listening more carefully to others. For a long time, I didn’t listen carefully because I thought listening to someone meant agreeing with them. But one of the most important things we are learning here in Region 3 is that we can really listen deeply to other people’s points of view, without agreeing with those points of view.”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion
Based upon what you’ve read in Acts I, II & III, what would you say is Roger Briggs’ ‘theory of leadership’? Michael Thomas’? How do you think their respective theories of leadership have changed over time? What do you think caused those changes?

What is your ‘theory of leadership’, i.e., what do you think leaders do and what makes them successful or not?

Early on, Michael Thomas realized that what he was actually trying to do was change the culture in his organization. How do you think that change in thinking affected how he saw his role as the regional office’s AEO?

What is your theory about organization culture, i.e., what is it and how does it change or evolve over time?
Act IV

When John Robertson decided to move his family to San Luis Obispo in 1998, and take a senior engineer position with the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, he had big expectations for himself and the organization he was joining. A graduate of the University of California, Davis, where he also played defensive end for the school’s championship football team, Robertson was no stranger to hard work. “Playing for Coach Sochor taught me a lot about being successful in football,” Robertson offers, his large hands gesturing to make his point, “but even more about being successful in life—and what he taught us was that the key was hard work.”

Robertson continues, “what I learned in the classroom was confirmed on the football field: the path of least resistance never leads to significant achievement. And that’s what attracted me to this place, and to working with Roger: he never chooses the path of least resistance; he never settles for ‘good enough’; and, he never accepts anything other than excellence in the work we do here. It is something I admire in him, and it certainly motivates me to do my best.”

Pausing as if to order his words with absolute precision, Robertson adds, “what’s different now, and it was a big intellectual hurdle for a lot of us engineers, is that excellence has now been extended to include our relationships with each other and not just our technical solutions to engineering problems. Roger and Michael expect us to be excellent leaders, as well as engineers, and that’s something all of us have had to work on … and that work has been really hard.”

When he’s pushed to explain what he means by ‘leadership excellence’, Robertson explains it this way, “the phrase we use around here is ‘higher-order thinking’ and what we mean by that phrase is the idea that over time we are working on bigger and more important problems. For example, ‘low-order thinking’ would be something like office politics: who’s in and out of favor; who’s gossiping about whom; and, who’s getting resources and who’s not. Higher ordering thinking, for us, is not about what’s going on in the office, but what’s happening in the environment—Are we accomplishing our mission and goals? Is water quality improving or not? Are we figuring out how to get six dollars worth of value out of five dollars worth of expense?—and that kind of higher-order thinking is energizing.

“When you feel like what you do makes a difference,” Robertson smiles broadly, “it makes you want to come to work and get more done, rather than do just enough to stay off your boss’ radar screen. And for us, the key to improving water quality is to focus on higher-order thinking.”

When he thinks back to 1994, and becoming the Executive Officer for the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, Roger Briggs smiles wryly and says, “I was the prototypical DIYer [do it yourself] back then, and as a consequence, I didn’t get as much done as I wanted … but I sure did keep the organization flat: there was virtually no hierarchy. So, it was a big deal, particularly for me, when Michael and I decided to create a layer of bureaucracy and appoint Lisa [McCann] and John [Robertson], as section chiefs, along with Harvey [Packard].”

When John Robertson was appointed Section Chief, he was both honored and humbled. “To be honest,” Robertson offers, “I was more humbled than honored, because I knew that there were people in the organization with more seniority than me. But Michael’s appointment as AEO had already broken the mold, so it was not as tough on Lisa and me as it could have been. Still, it was tough, because on Friday you’re a peer with folks, and then on Monday you’re their supervisor.

“I was confident in my ability as an engineer,” Robertson continues, “but I was less certain in my ability as a leader. Fortunately, we made a significant and sustained effort, both as individuals and as an organization, to get better at leadership. I think a lot of people, myself included, have been surprised how hard leadership is … or, I guess more accurately, how hard good leadership is, and how much work it takes.”

Again, Robertson pauses, working to find the language to express his thoughts clearly and concisely, “we’ve been attending leadership classes for about three years now, and we’ve covered a wide range of topics, but I still remember something we read in that first class, back in September 2006 … it was a quote from Marcel Proust:

The only true voyage of discovery would not be to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes.

“What I remember talking about was how hard it was to see things from another’s point of view, and especially how hard it was to see ourselves as others might see us … but until we did so, no significant change would happen in the organization or in us. I still think about that quote and the challenge it represents.”
"I think John is a good section chief," one of the staff engineers in Robertson’s section offers, "and we are actively pursuing change … but I haven’t seen a lot of evidence of change. The first ten years I was here, we were a lean and active agency. In the second ten years, we were still lean but less active. In the last ten years, we’ve tripled in size and become much more insulated, much more focused on planning, with little contact with the outside world. We dump huge amounts of resources into projects that don’t really make much difference. We develop very complex plans, then complex implementation plans … but what’s missing is the actual doing—sometimes things go on for years. We’re comfortable with planning and less comfortable with doing."

"Here’s what’s different this time," offers another thirty-year veteran staff engineer, "Management’s sticking to it. In the past, we tried TQM (total quality management) and it failed, we tried Strategic Planning and it failed, but Michael and Lisa and John, they’re not giving up. To be honest, I still have some doubts, but my own experience is that things have gone very well—I can see how I’ve changed. I enjoy coming to work. And here’s why: because we have the freedom to think … and to try things.

"After Michael became AEO, and started talking about ‘change’ and ‘becoming a performance-based organization’, all I could think was, ‘yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all before.’ But I’m surprised, continually surprised, that he and John and Lisa keep it alive. John keeps saying to us, ‘try things … and if they don’t work, at least we’ll learn from our mistakes.’ And here is what is amazing: they actually mean it. I’ve tried some new things, and made some mistakes, but instead of getting punished for making a mistake, I get encouraged to try something else instead … can you imagine that, not getting punished for making an honest mistake, but instead getting encouragement to keep trying? We really do have a vision of the future.

“But my real concern is this furlough thing … it really sucks morale right out of the organization … and it sure makes it tougher on John and Lisa and Michael to keep it going. I don’t know how they are going to keep the enthusiasm up."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Based upon your own experience and observations, develop a list of ‘Five Rules for Effective Organizational Change’.

Next, go around the table and have everyone share their five rules.

Were there any rules that everyone had on their lists? If so, do you find evidence of those ‘universal’ rules in the case study?

Resources


