

Boats, Bureaucracy and Innovation

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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This article is adapted from the author's book titled *Innovative Planning: Your Church in 4-D*.

In many seminars, I start off with this statement: “*Research shows that churches are just about the worst run organizations in America*” One of the big reasons for that is that most churches operate as bureaucracies. So, what is a bureaucracy?

While certainly not an expert, I enjoy boating. A few summers ago my wife and I, along with another couple, were in my 19' bow rider in some fairly choppy surf on the North Carolina coast near the intersection of the ocean, the intercoastal waterway, and the mouth of the Cape Fear River. As my wife and her friend were talking in the back of the boat, preoccupied in comparing notes about kids and teenagers, I saw in the distance a large freighter, heading down the river and ultimately out to sea. I decided to head out toward choppiest waters to ride along with the freighter.

As I thought later about this little trip, I noticed some points of comparison between the freighter and my boat, and organizations.

The Bureaucracy and Comfort Zones

The first thing I noticed was the exhaust from the engine that made it nearly impossible to ride behind the freighter – a bummer since the water in the wake of the freighter was as smooth as glass compared to the rest of the river. The smoother water in the wake of the freighter's path was really where I wanted to keep my little boat. After all, my wife was right – the water was pretty rough that day, and in the wake the ride was smooth!

Just as it was quite comfortable riding in the wake of the freighter, it can be pretty comfortable being a part of a bureaucracy. The bureaucracy, for all its lack of flexibility, can provide a great ride for those who desire to work or live in a mode that will require little disturbance. Many who just want to get by, and who don't care about excellence, can find a home in a bureaucratic organization, where their 'comfort' is not likely to be challenged.

Bureaucracy and (the Lack Of) Influence

Here's something else I realized: if I had pulled directly in front of that freighter and stopped on a dime, the captain probably would never have been able to stop before plowing into my little boat. I had absolutely no influence with that freighter.

This illustrates another aspect of the bureaucracy: It is very difficult for any one person, or group, to have significant influence on the direction or operation of the organization. This can be frustrating for people who are change agents, who want to see their organizations operate more efficiently, and who may desire to have a part in productive change for the sake of their own self-satisfaction.

Bureaucracy's (I'm) Personal Nature

As a part of being made in the image of God, we desire community with others. On the boat that day, I'm really looking for people on the freighter. I could at least throw up my hand (a common 'rite of passage gesture' among boaters in the waters of North Carolina). So I was pretty disappointed when no one showed – no one was visible at all!

Like the freighter headed toward the ocean, bureaucratic organizations are inherently impersonal. It's not that they necessarily intend to be. It's the nature of bureaucracy that procedures, policies, written and unwritten rules, and expectations with regard to standards of behavior tend to run the organization. *Non-human systems* are really in charge. The captain of the freighter and the crew may very well have been nice folks, but I would never interact with them to find out.

Bureaucracy and Adaptability

The final thing that really stood out to me was the singular focus of the freighter's mission. It surely was not out for a joyride. It was not built to do anything but go in a relatively straight path, over long distances, through potentially turbulent seas, to transport cargo to a predetermined destination.

On the other hand, my little boat had much more maneuverability, which was important to me, as I like to go in to little 'nooks and crannies' in the waterway.

Bureaucracies, like the freighter, are typically so large and inflexible that the biggest danger to them could come in the need to change course quickly. The freighter would have a difficult time making a course change. A sudden shift in the depth of the waterway channel could ground the freighter with little warning.

Likewise, bureaucratic organization usually are characterized by so many layers of management, that by the time decisions are made and executed, windows of opportunity are closing, or even have closed.

The Little Bayliner That Could

That day on the water showed me a lot! That freighter, an amazing creation, does the job it's supposed to do, and does it well, while keeping everybody safe. On the other hand, my boat was much smaller, very simple and less safe, but it's a lot of fun to ride.

Bottom line, an innovative organization operates more like my small boat than like the freighter. Adaptability, maneuverability, speed, and responsiveness are characteristic of my boat, and are some of the things usually characteristic of the innovative organization.

Important Things to Know

Bud Wrenn is a Ministry Associate with The Columbia Partnership. He is the founder of both Integrity Church and the Innovative Church Community, both based in Burlington, NC. Pinnacle Consulting and Coaching Group at www.pinnaclecccg.org is the organization through which he does speaking, training, and coaching. The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. **Travel Free Learning** is a knowledge sharing emphasis. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.