

## **Turning the Ship Around** **Changing the policies and culture of a government agency to make ecosystem management work**

*by Jennifer M. Belcher*  
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Will the last white male leaving the DNR please put the toilet seat down! the sign on the men's room wall announced, and I was reminded of just how difficult the job I had undertaken was going to be.

The year was 1993, and I had just been elected as Washington State's Commissioner of Public Lands. The commissioner administers the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR), a large and wide-reaching agency with 1600 full-time employees, seven regional offices, and the responsibility for managing 5.8 million acres of timber, agricultural, and submerged lands held in trust for Washington's educational institutions. I was the first woman to hold the office and the first commissioner to pose a real threat to the stranglehold the big timber companies had always had on the DNR and its operations.

I had two major challenges facing me. The first was to design and put in place a comprehensive new policy that, if successful, would change forever the way we harvest timber in Washington. The second was to motivate an organization set in its ways for at least forty years to want to put the policy in place.

The election that year had been one of the most contentious in history, and the timber companies and their allies had spent nearly a million dollars to put their candidate (my opponent) in office. For a political office that had typically gone unnoticed and where little money was needed to win, this was a first.

To fulfill my campaign commitments "to bring a more environmentally sensitive approach to managing public lands" would mean staring down those same big timber companies who had worked so hard to defeat me and winning over the very men who had so boldly put their concerns on the wall.

Two issues were at the heart of the election: First, which candidate could, or would, make the changes in the DNR that would hold timber companies accountable for their environmental damage, which was proving to be significant (the list of old-growth-dependent threatened and endangered species was growing rapidly). Second, who could manage the state's own lands more responsibly.

Because the department both regulates the timber industry and sells huge supplies of state timber to it, the industry has a more-than-usual interest in who is commissioner and has always played a key financial role in who gets elected.

The public was demanding a higher level of responsibility from the commissioner in both regulatory and timber sales areas. I was the first commissioner elected as a direct

response to the desire for greater environmental protection.

### **Changing Public Policy**

There are two things you should never watch-making sausage and making the law. I'm going to add making public policy. Today's expectations of public policy makers are almost impossible to meet. And to go into well-established bureaucracies and make meaningful change is extraordinarily difficult.

For purposes of this article, I'm going to use only one example of my attempts to make policy change, but it is one that probably represents the most incredible change we were able to make. It certainly will illustrate the necessity and difficulty of changing an organization's culture. To change public policy, I had to overcome the resistance of the timber companies (who were fearful of new regulatory requirements), as well as bring to the department a new way of doing business. This meant changing the long established culture of the DNR.

At this point, I must be honest and tell you that I'm not sure it's possible to truly change the culture of a department (or business), but that is clearly what the men's room signs indicated my new employees were fearful of. They were convinced that having a woman, and especially a woman who was not a forester and who presumably didn't understand the timber industry, meant that their lives were going to change in ways they didn't like.

My first and most important task was to gain the confidence of my employees. They were, after all, the people who would either carry out my policies and philosophies or trash them. So I set out to meet all the employees of the department in my first two weeks-no easy task, I assure you. The "department" is spread over the entire state of Washington, with employees living in 200 communities. But we managed to pull them together in their regions, or at the headquarters building in Olympia, so that I could introduce myself, lay out the plans that I had, and ask for their help and advice. A significant majority of them were eager to help and were pleased to be asked. I can remember one long-time employee who put it this way: "Just tell me how many trees per acre you want left, and we'll do it!"

But the changes we needed to make were far more complex than that approach would have allowed. We were attempting to introduce an "ecosystem" approach, which meant that we needed to consider the full impacts of our timber harvest activities on the entire ecosystem. Our task, simply stated, was to find ways to harvest \$300 million worth of timber each year and still leave good habitat for fish and wildlife and great places for people to recreate. And to do it over 1.8 million acres of land.

In 1993, most of the private timber companies were actively working to overturn the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in Congress. I believed that to be a foolhardy and impossible goal and so looked for alternatives. Ultimately, we opted to develop what's called a "Habitat Conservation Plan" (HCP).

At the time, no other large landowner had undertaken such an extensive activity. There was a lot of skepticism, both in the department and in the industry, about what it would cost to develop such a plan, and whether the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service would actually ever approve it. I felt the state had little choice. Unlike the private companies, each of our timber sales was publicly advertised and highly scrutinized. There was growing scientific evidence that large-scale clearcuts were damaging water quality and helping to bring specific animals near extinction. The northern spotted owl and the marbled murrelet had just been listed as threatened, and there was considerable discussion of the coming listings of salmon and steelhead. And the state's 2.1 million acres of forestlands contained much of these species' remaining habitat.

So, we set out to develop the HCP. We gave ourselves eighteen months to gain approval, which proved to be about half the actual time necessary. The HCP was approved by the department's governing board and the federal government in January, 1997. At that time, we had developed the largest multi-species protection plan in the country, covering 1.8 million acres of land.

From the very first discussion of our HCP, we included our attorneys in the process. They helped us to formulate assumptions, review scientific decisions, draft communications materials, and negotiate with the approving bodies; and they defended us, successfully, I might add, in court. Whenever you make significant change in public policy today you should expect to be sued. Unfortunately, this has become a standard step in the process, almost as certain as public information requests and environmental impact analysis, and, yes! there it is-step number X-go to court. Anticipating a lawsuit can help you win your case. We were sued by some of the trust beneficiaries, who believed their revenue from timber sales would be affected, and ultimately settled the case in our favor. The state is still threatened with litigation by the Native American tribes, who believe the plan does not offer strong enough environmental protections.

What we had achieved to this point was monumental: we had changed the policies that govern the management of state-owned lands in Washington. And there were important lessons learned in the process. Whether you are setting out to change the policies of a public agency or a private company, you are changing many cultures: the culture of decision making, the culture of employee behavior, and the culture of public acceptance. All must be attended to if you want the change to be successful.

The cultural changes we had achieved to this point were mostly related to changing public perception of what is or is not acceptable practice for a government agency managing public lands. The critical elements of our success included:

- A well-developed strategy to gain approval of our HCP by the public, the governing board, our beneficiary groups, the Governor, and ultimately the state legislature
- Assurance of a scientifically credible basis for the provisions of the plan
- Good legal advice and support
- A keen understanding of our adversaries

- Media support
- Convincing the majority of our employees that this was the right thing to do

We now had before us a very thick plan that our employees would put into practice on the ground and in the field. It was time to tackle the culture of employee behavior.

### **Making the Change Real**

I have been reminded many times that change is great-so long as it's the other guy you're asking to do the changing! Employees, even those truly ready to learn new ways of working, needed a lot more information about the coming changes than we were often able to give them. Even though we set up employee committees, put them in charge of scientific and technical work groups, and included personal contact with me on a regular basis, it was never enough to overcome the natural concerns that employees had about their job changing.

It goes almost without saying that in order to change a culture you first have to understand it, and you need to keep clearly in mind the results you want to achieve.

The department had a well-established culture when I arrived in 1993:

- It was almost exclusively white.
- It was mostly male, with females primarily in clerical, employee services, accounting, and some information technology jobs.
- It was steeped in forty years of traditional forestry (knowledge was handed down from old forester to new).
- Employees believed that you should begin and end your thirty-year state government career in the department.
- There was an apparent "right of promotion" based almost totally on seniority.
- The timeframe for change was thought to be the same as that of a timber rotation-sixty years from start to finish.
- Employees saw themselves as the "good guys," protecting the state's trust lands, sometimes even against the public who own the trusts.

The culture I needed to have in place if we were to succeed in implementing the new policies included:

- An ability to take decisive action, quickly reaching all 1600 employees
- Willingness to incorporate scientific findings about the needs of fish and wildlife
- A more truthful recognition of the impacts of timber harvest on the environment
- Flexibility in our approach to doing our jobs
- Valuing the new and questioning the old
- Responsiveness to public perception and political reality
- Diversity to match our growing population

To achieve the new culture, I knew we'd have to bring in some new people, convince

current employees that the new ways were beneficial to them and the department, and develop and maintain an incredible communication system to continually reach 1600 people.

### **Finding "In House Cheerleaders"**

I got some really good advice from an old friend who said, "If you want to change a department as big as DNR, you can't do it from the top. You've got to have people at every level of the organization who are not only on your team but are your cheerleaders. If you can't find them in the organization, then get control of hiring and make sure you bring them in at every level."

Although the existing civil service system in Washington doesn't allow an agency director to "get control" of the hiring at every level, I was able to influence hiring decisions by being very specific about the effect that hiring good employees would have on a supervisor's evaluation for advancement.

Ultimately, I went looking for specific individuals at each level of the department who would become the "in-house cheerleaders" for our proposed changes. In some instances that meant hiring new people, and in most it simply meant finding the employee who was willing to take a risk with his fellow workers, was curious about what we were doing, or simply was the recognized "leader of the gang," and converting him to our plan. In a small number of cases, I had to remove a person who was determined to go in another direction.

To recruit these cheerleaders, we worked hard to make sure all employees understood how valuable they were to the department and to our plans. We surveyed all employees and asked for their advice on key topics, and we established an employee advisory committee to work directly with executive management. Two actions that paid real dividends were these:

First, we ensured that the science group was led by scientists in the department. Both Chuck Turley and Lenny Young were highly regarded inside and outside the DNR. Their ability to discuss science in lay terms and to translate the scientific impacts of each policy option was absolutely the most important aspect of our entire plan. We were fortunate to have in our department two people with these skills, and they became our most important weapon in the science vs. politics battle. As scientists, they had credibility everywhere—with other scientists, with our employees, with policy makers, with our governing board, and with our adversaries. Because both were exceptionally skilled communicators, they were able to translate their considerable knowledge into on-the-ground impacts of each choice, thus allowing the policy makers to know the ultimate results of the choices they would make.

Second, we placed a long-time employee of the department—one who had been part of the "old ways" of doing things—in charge of plan development. We needed someone who understood how things had been done, and why, if we were to do them differently. We

also needed someone with operational knowledge of the department so that when our scientists proposed things that wouldn't work or would be time consuming and costly, we would know immediately. Selecting Rick Cooper to be in charge of the project gave us credibility with almost all the employees of the department. When the few employees who simply would never go along with change came forward to protest, having them argue with the "professional forestry manager" with twenty-five years of department experience, rather than with me, assured our success.

### **Training and Repetition**

I have always known that training is crucial. What I didn't know was just how difficult it can be to get it to take!

Our first training program was a week long, and every forester in the department (several hundred people) participated. We repeated key portions several months later, we printed them up and gave everybody copies, we had the key thoughts put on walls all over the department, we used them as the basis for fun "tests" and games at staff meetings. But what we ran headlong into was human nature, which is to find what's comfortable and stay there until you're forced to move.

Sometimes our employees would take the new ideas into the field, try to put them in place, and when it was too difficult, simply revert back to what they knew. In other cases, they were unwilling to tell us that the new ideas didn't make sense to them or that they simply didn't understand. And it would then be months before we would discover that the new practices weren't being followed.

Recognizing that we needed someone who was "one of them"-a department forester-to devote time in the field to helping people make the change, we selected Michael Perez-Gibson, a twenty-year veteran of the department, who was respected by his colleagues. Michael has a curious mind and was absolutely dedicated to making the HCP work. At the time, Michael was manager of our entire forestry program and had the authority to direct field operations to meet our new policy. We sent him to the field to talk with foresters, to challenge them, to make them remember their early days in the department when everything they did was new and foreign, and to remind them of their resilience and their past successes. In other words, to help them cross over into the new world of 21st century forestry.

Michael realized that another very special training program was needed, and we hired two professionals from the University of Washington, Professors Jerry Franklin and Andrew Carey, to develop a training program for the twenty people out of 1600 who were in key supervisory positions in those regions where we needed to make the most change quickly. This would be a real test of our ability to change thinking in the department because the two professors, especially Jerry, were seen as "radical" thinkers and environmental sympathizers. I will never forget that program because it marked the turning point in successful implementation of our plan.

The training was held at a forest service site in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, about an hour and a half from our headquarters in Olympia. I had driven there to kick off the training and for what felt like the millionth time in five years, stared down some of the old guard in the department. There were people over whom I had little control since they were civil service employees who would most likely be there when my terms as commissioner were over, in fact they didn't hesitate to remind me on a regular basis.

That evening, a number of our trainees literally had arms folded across their chests, leaned back in their chairs, and issued a oh-so-obvious challenge to me and their instructors to make them learn anything. I left wondering if we would ever get our plan to work.

Three days later Michael called and pleaded with me to come back to meet with the group. He was exuberant. He was convinced that an epiphany had occurred and insisted that only my presence on the last evening of the class could assure that we would go forward. I grumbled, shuffled an already-too-full calendar and drove the hour and a half to the camp. I arrived at dusk and was hurried through dinner so that we could do a field trip. This meant going out into the woods in near darkness, contending with the mosquitoes (which are a close runner up to the big guys in Alaska), and seeing the results of their week's work, which was going to be difficult given the impending darkness.

Nevertheless, I grabbed a cup of something hot, the mosquito lotion, and my jacket and headed out into the field. What happened there was nothing short of a miracle. Those same twenty people who had glared at me three days earlier could hardly wait to show me what they'd learned. They were now on a first name basis with "Jerry and Andy," and they walked me through their class projects with the pride of that first science project in 6th grade. They had, indeed, learned. They were ready now to take the message to their employees and to compete with each other to be the first to demonstrate "new forestry" successfully.

When we returned to the camp, I was besieged with requests to let them experiment on the ground immediately with what they'd learned. This was a very serious request because they would be experimenting in spotted owl nest areas with the habitat of a species that could well go extinct if our experiments failed.

I learned a valuable lesson that evening, and it is this: when the troops think they are ready to fly, you have to let them, even if it means they might fall out of the nest.

There were many risks associated with letting the employees experiment, but we had turned a huge corner in our attempt to change the culture in the department, and the risks of not trying were greater. So I turned them loose.

In the eight years I spent as Commissioner, I experienced many successes and a great deal of pleasure. Nothing gave me the satisfaction, however, of literally seeing my employees make a dynamic change in their own culture. They now own the HCP policy, and whether I am there or not, they will take responsibility for seeing it through.

## **Lessons on Changing an Organization's Culture**

*Be very sure you really want the job* because it will mean a personal commitment of your time and energy that goes beyond your expectations.

*Define the vision you have*, the direction you want to send people, the principles that guide you, and the measurable goals you have as clearly as you can. And put it all in writing so that people can refer to it, examine it, question it, and hopefully, understand it.

*Hire people at each level of your organization who share your vision.* Make sure they can actually articulate it to others because no matter how much we try to flatten our organizations, there is still a hierarchy of communication that works against you in making change.

*Work to understand the culture you inherit.* Find the people in your organization who've "been there" and who are willing to share insights with you. Take time at the beginning to be observant. It's amazing what you can learn just by listening and watching what goes on as "normal".

*Carefully define the culture you want to establish.* What are the key elements of the culture that you'll need to achieve your goals, and how can you articulate them so that they'll be built into your hiring, recognition, and promotion systems?

*Have a strategy for achieving your goal*-I mean a really serious strategy, as if you're going to war, because you are. There will be people inside and outside your organization who will work to prevent your success; you must anticipate them and be prepared to include them, listen to them, hear them, and incorporate at least some of their ideas to succeed.

*Develop a really good communication system*-one that guarantees you face-to-face time with key employees and is repetitious. It takes about seven times of hearing a message before most of us get it.

*Know your adversaries well.* Truly big changes bring out the worst people, and the worst in people. There are organizations existing today whose sole purpose is to prevent any change in government policy, and in most cases, they have the money to hire people whose job is to do just that.

*Expect to be sued.* Prepare for it by thinking your moves through carefully and including your attorneys from the very beginning of your efforts. It will pay big dividends in the long run.

*Remember that you can't change anyone's culture*-only they can do that. You can motivate them to want to change and support them when they do, which will sometimes encourage others to join them in the change.



**About the Author:**

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