

Visitor Advocate: A Novel Management Strategy

By Jean A. Merriman

For some time, I have had the gnawing feeling that all was not quite well in paradise. Today's specialization, operational complexity, and endlessly competing demands on everyone's time to police and service our organizational machine is a source of dismay. One is haunted by the suggestion that the very purpose for which our Service was established gets put on the back burner. Too many important things fall between the cracks and no one is quite sure why. Our little experiment was conceived out of our anxiety that attention to the visitor, his experience and needs, was less than complete. While there are multiple examples of excellence, there also are glaring voids.

We needed a common sense evaluation of our collective response to Yellowstone's visitors – direct and immediate feedback to managers and supervisors that can be translated into constructive and responsive change. We do not need a weighty study cast in statistical jargon geared to meet astringent academic criteria.

What to do? Everyone is busy, overloaded, and will never have time for introspection and assessment. Besides, we all have territory to protect and don't appreciate our peers and colleagues being critical of our programs. Enter Jean Merriman; perceptive, critical (yet not threatening), positive, empathetic, and a person whose understanding of organizational psychology and other "realities" allowed her to be a catalyst – the ideal Visitor Advocate. Following is her description of our experiment.

Bob Barbee, Supt.

Yellowstone National Park

Yellowstone's Superintendent, Bob Barbee, introduced an innovative management scheme in the summer of 1985 with an experimental seasonal position having three broad guidelines: Improving the vis-

itor's experience and, if possible, making it better quickly if it were not what it should be; looking into why things fall through the cracks; and making the administration more responsive. This unusual concept was put to the test when the nod went to me for the position. As a Professor of Environmental Studies and Planning at Sonoma State University in California, I had taught for many years in an interdisciplinary field and was in some sense pre-adapted to think wholistically and synthetically in terms of where the complex parts fit together to make the Yellowstone operation tick. While having no long-term career stake in any aspect of the park's bureaucracy, I had 12 years' seasonal experience at Yellowstone and Acadia National Parks, which gave me the insider's view of how things are done.

In a sense, I created my own structure as the position evolved. At the outset it seemed that some level of accountability was in order, so I kept a daily log of my activities, which I discussed with the Superintendent about once a week. A couple of typical entries:

6:22 Checked out visitor complaint about toilets at Fountain Paint Pots. Whew!

7:27 Wide ranging discussion with Canyon Maintenance Foreman re amphitheater repairs and winter operation, especially re warming hut and needs for sewage and water.

These notes were always somewhat cryptic. My goal was to fact-find in order to improve situations, not to fault-find. I needed to get candid input without posing a threat to people and careers. I tried several approaches to finding out what Yellowstone visitors were really experiencing; looking at visitor complaints, reading reports of problems from field staff, interviewing as many employees as possible from the Safety Officer to waiters, top management to seasonal personnel. At times I posed as a typical park visitor - I called her Sara Jones from Illinois - eating the food, camping, attending activities, and sleeping in concessioner lodging. On one occasion I was accompanied by my wheelchair-bound mother which permitted an experiential evaluation of handicapped access.

Having gathered information in this way, I selected some of the material for presentation at the weekly Squad meetings. These presentations followed such themes as, "What are we doing that is inconvenient or confusing for visitors?" For instance, for eight seasons there were visitor and staff complaints about errors in the park map but the solution somehow had kept eluding us. This was solved easily with a quick check on the accuracy of the proposed 1986 map. A more complex issue was how to improve and simplify the complicated system used to obtain permits and passes. While no one liked the status quo very much, there were constraints inhibiting change: money, staff, physical plant and the habit of always having done it that way. The upshot of these discussions was to set a 1986 management goal for reviewing the whole process of issuing boating, fishing and backcountry permits and the Golden Age/Golden Access passes.

Another of my presentation themes was, "What do the visitors find after we invite them to a particular place in the Park?" In this instance, I brought the park to the Squad meeting via two slide presentations. The

first focused on the physical degradation of Natural Bridge, a delightful little area on a side road, which was losing the priority battle to better known attractions such as Old Faithful. As a result of the presentation, the area has been scrutinized by top management, with the likelihood that eventually there will emerge specific plans for the area. The second slide presentation dealt with the amphitheaters which, in 1984, were attended by 170,000 visitors. Signing, siting, and maintenance ranged from adequate to poor in 10 facilities. The goal here was to highlight the need for an interdisciplinary team, including naturalists, the safety officer, planners, handicapped access specialists, and maintenance personnel, to create for the amphitheaters a maintenance schedule that was on a fast track in line but with budgetary and use realities. In both instances, field people and administrators across all divisional lines were made aware that a natural place and several much-used facilities were in need of attention and that improvement would dramatically enhance the visitor's impression of Yellowstone.

The literature that the Yellowstone visitor gets, whether free or purchased, is highly varied in style and quality. Each piece evolved from some need of the moment or some opportunity to tap a particular expertise. The output is often redundant and frequently laced with inconsistencies and errors, which is not surprising, since publications involve at least six different, relatively independent offices. While I was certainly not the first to see the need to develop an organizational process for overview of printed materials, I was able to be a catalyst for change. I began with a short paper for the Superintendent pointing to the poor economy and matching result of run-away publications. He responded by drawing together representatives from various pertinent divisions and offices to address the problem. My role was that of a facilitator with this group, directing and organizing the initial meetings until a chair could be selected. The work of the committee is on-going, but seems to be moving toward developing a logo, style and content standards, and recommendations for restructuring the publication process.

Visitors expect every uniformed NPS employee to be able to answer their special questions. It's not possible, of course, but it was clear that there was room for improvement in Yellowstone, and that the situation might be addressed by a training and orientation program. I found that nearly half of the high-public contact employees received no special preparation for this range of questions, especially maintenance and some concessioner people, and that others such as the naturalists and rangers had different and highly specialized programs. Superintendent Barbee again gave me a facilitator's role to get a broadly representative group together to address these issues. This group's work, too, is on-going, with the goal of giving Yellowstone's employees a baseline orientation program with information about the mission of the park, an understanding of specific job roles and a competent grasp of the mundane but critical information that visitors need.

Continued on next page

A third major guideline for my work was to help the administration be more responsive to all sectors of this 2½ million acre park. No one story is remarkable, but many small instances added up – informal notes to the assistant superintendent, the landscape architect, the concessions specialist and others, made the right connection about things as varied and commonplace as toilet installations, road stripes, weather reports and phone procedures. I actively sought ways to recognize people outside the administration by suggesting that certain commendable staff achievements might be interesting COURIER stories.

The superintendent's unswerving support, often stated publicly, was particularly important to me personally, for I felt the void of not having co-workers with whom I could check things out. The combination of Barbee's public support and the novelty of the approach had intangible payoffs – some of the ideas set in motion may surface later in beneficial ways. We found that just asking the right question in the right context could set repairs and remedial actions in motion.

Dr. Gary Machlis, Project Leader of the NPS Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho, has written about the conditions that make change possible. Paradoxically, we all need change and yet we all resist it. After all, even "going from bad to worse" is a change. One criterion for acceptance of a novel idea or procedure is that it be explicitly defined as an experiment so that if it is inappropriate it won't be set in concrete. My work was clearly labeled an experiment for a summer and as some good results began to emerge the skeptics became supportive and helpful in ways that reinforced what I was doing.

Dr. Machlis has lectured on employee burn-out in NPS settings. According to him one positive step in alleviating this dread phenomenon is providing employees an opportunity to be heard by someone. I am touched, really, that people entrusted so much in candor. I responded with scrupulous discretion, or as the aphorism goes, "We were designed with two ears, always open, and one mouth; it will close."

The question remains: "Is this unusual management approach unique to the personalities of those involved? In certain particulars, possibly yes. But I feel that on overview of the entire operation, made by an outsider with sensitivity to the inner social order of parks, for the purpose of giving the superintendent information he needs to know, has a place.

Perhaps a suitable job description, provisionally titled, "Visitor Advocate" might be:

Incumbent must have several seasons prior NPS experience, VIP-retirees desirable; no career stake beyond professionalism; positive view of people; communication skills; tolerance for travel and social isolation; high tolerance for ambiguity.

Rewards – flexible schedule, highly varied work, the chance to meet a lot of the park family you'd never meet otherwise; unlimited opportunity for creativity and a view of the big picture that expands one's sense of the National Park mission.

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