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Contents

VOL. 1, NO. 2 ■ FALL 1989

2 Letters

3 The Log

Correctional notes and comments

Why Accreditation?

Chaplaincy in the 1990's: A Changing Calling

Electronic Monitoring: Issues for Managers

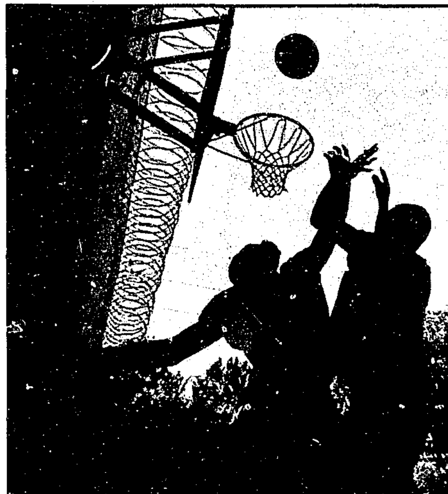
The U.S. Marshals: 200 Years of Service

126788

11 Taking Charge of the Future

Dr. Ronald J. Stupak interviewed by Doug Green

How the strategic planning philosophy is becoming part of the Bureau of Prisons' organizational culture.



126789

17 Relieving Subpopulation Pressures

Matthew J. Bronick

The use of private facilities to help manage special populations.

126790

22 Providing Day Care to Prison Employees

Chip Gibson

A study of the Danbury, Connecticut, day care pilot project.

126791

23 Her Children, Their Future

Joyce Carmouche and Joretta Jones

The unique problems of inmate mothers—and how prison staff work to help them.

126792

28 Inmates and Computers

Christopher Erlewine and Helene Cavior

A new security threat requires new answers as institutions become increasingly computerized.

126793

32 A Working Partnership for Health Care

Dr. Robert L. Brutsché interviewed by John Roberts

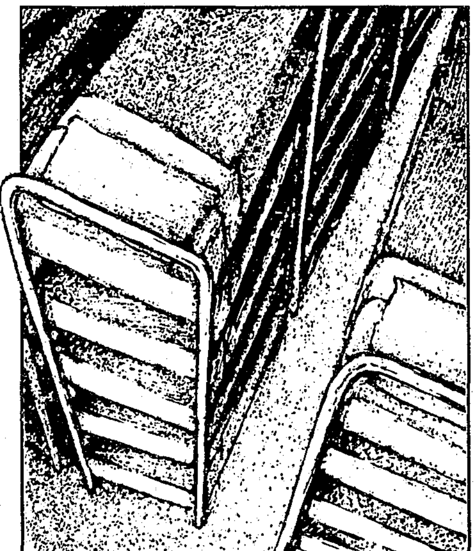
A discussion of three decades of prison medicine with the Bureau of Prisons' former Medical Director.

126794

39 Quality Control for Prison Managers

William G. Saylor

The Key Indicators/Strategic Support System gives managers a window on a rapidly changing environment.



126795

43 Managing Crowded Prisons

Richard H. Franklin

A new research work sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections.

126788

Taking Charge of the Future

Strategic action for quality growth in the Bureau of Prisons

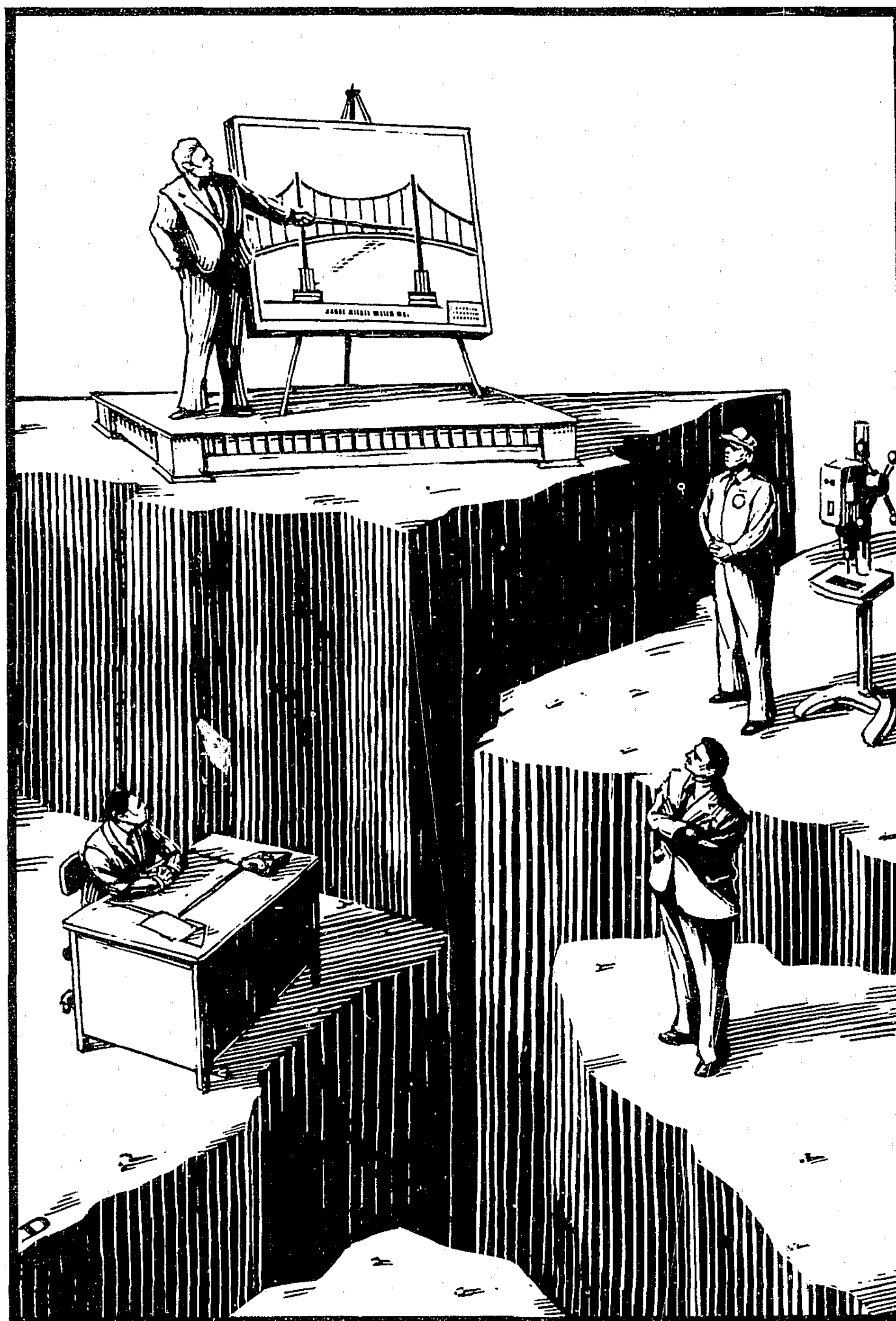
An interview with Dr. Ronald J. Stupak

Strategic planning is becoming as important in public administration as it has been in the private sector for a number of years. While private business' goals can often be expressed in financial terms, public organizations must use different criteria. The strategic planning process provides a methodology through which any type of organization can take a proactive approach to its future.

Dr. Ronald J. Stupak has been a consultant to the Federal Bureau of Prisons since 1987. He has worked on both the national and local levels to help institutionalize strategic planning within the Bureau's organizational culture. Because of his experience working with many different types and sizes of organizations, he is especially well placed to comment on how the Bureau's involvement with strategic planning has developed.

Dr. Stupak is Professor of Public Administration at the University of Southern California's School of Public Administration. He is a fellow (and former director) of the university's Washington Public Affairs Center, has previously taught at Miami University of Ohio, and served at the Federal Executive Institute for more than 10 years as professor, associate director, and dean. Dr. Stupak has published more than 125 books, articles, and papers on management, public administration, and related topics. His many clients have included the Central Intelligence Agency, the Institute for Court Management, the Environmental Protection Agency, and a number of corporations. He is editor in chief of the Federal Management Journal.

Federal Prisons Journal *editor Doug Green interviewed Dr. Stupak in September 1989.*



Bob Dahm

Tell me a little about the history of strategic planning—how the concept came to be formulated and why organizations decide to adopt it.

Planning has always been extremely important in military strategy. In the United States, especially in the public sector, due to the emphasis of people like [former Secretary of Defense] Robert McNamara and others, strategic planning started to become extremely important in terms of nuclear deterrence. You really need a strategy to avoid the possibility of using nuclear weapons.

Also, the overwhelming threat of Japanese and local competition made the need to plan the future in a cost-conscious environment a reality for the private sector in the United States. The cutback years of the Carter and Reagan administrations made it an absolute necessity for organizations in the Federal Government to do more long-term thinking—having quality growth be more important than growth for the sake of growth.

The Japanese are long-term thinkers. The American strength has always been short-term, pragmatic, day by day. That's OK when you have resources to burn, but when the race evens up in terms of limited resources, you end up—excuse the cliché—in a global village. Then you must do strategic planning. You must plan for your future.

When you go to work as a consultant for an organization, any organization, what do you start looking for when you're thinking about their strategic planning process?

I'm convinced that the essence of strategic planning working in organizations is a person or group at the center of power of the organization saying, "This is essential for what we do day to day." That's the first thing I look for. In fact, that's how I got involved with the Bureau of Prisons.

Some people's histories in the organization will not allow them to adjust to what is changing in the environment.

I'm much more interested in strategic implementation than in just strategic planning. My belief is that you have to link them together in what I call strategic management—when the global ideas at the top start to be compatible with their local "personalization." The people on the line have to buy into this, because it's not authority that makes it work, it's commitment. A lot of times, when strategic management doesn't work, it's because people try to overlay strategic management on a set of values that the consultant brings in.

So that the attitude you see is really, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it?"

That's the negation of everything about good management, whether in a relationship with a loved one, or a child, or with organizations. If you wait till it's broke till you fix it, that's the kiss of death.

I'm sure you often find that even at the very top of an organization, you have people who have occupied important roles for quite a few years and manage very well. All of a sudden, you're coming in and asking them to reconceptualize their relationships with other parts of the organization. That must be difficult for many people to do.

That's when strategic planning is absolutely needed, when there is a major change in leadership, or a major new demand from the set of stakeholders outside the organization, and when there is a transition coming toward tighter growth, rapid growth, or personnel changes. That's exactly when you have to go back and find out what business you're in; what are its values, its anchors. Strategic planning will not work if it violates the fundamental anchors of the organization.

But what does an organization need to change as it moves toward the new vision? One of the first things to do is go back and look at the people. Change has to become part of the mindset—not for the sake of change, but in terms of "where are we going? And how are we going to get there while maintaining the essence of who we are?" Either people *change* or *people* change.

In other words, recognize that things are changing and you can either choose to control the process or have it control you.

Absolutely. Luck favors the prepared mind. But there are times when people have to leave. Some people's histories in the organization will not allow them to adjust to what is changing in the environment. That sometimes becomes very difficult because these people have probably served the organization extremely well. You can work to develop them, but you cannot force them to go along with you.

They will buy in rhetorically but not operationally, or will become so locally oriented that they aren't even part of the process in terms of the larger vision.

So what did you see when you started looking at the Bureau of Prisons? For instance, what about the "core" versus the "peripheral" elements of the Bureau's culture?

There were five reasons I was convinced strategic planning would work in the Bureau. One, when I went out in the field, I saw people who are "cosmopolitans," who are moving up through the system and one day will end up at headquarters or as wardens; and the locals, who will stay at Lewisburg or wherever they are. The locals and the cosmopolitans have tremendous respect for each other. In many organizations, the high flyers going through the system and the locals treat each other as enemies. But in the Bureau, I saw a camaraderie that I haven't experienced in other organizations, where there are first-class and second-class citizens.

Second, whether you go to the Central Office or Milan, Michigan, there is a fundamental belief in some of the core anchors of the Bureau of Prisons—in the correctional officer, in the family, in integrity, in hard work. That said to me that you can build on a strong foundation of agreement.

Third, bright people—not just intellectual, but street smart—knew things were changing. Some of them weren't pleased with the fact that they were going to have to change, but they were savvy enough to know that change was the name of the game.

Dr. Ronald J. Stupak

Fourth, people wanted to learn. Lousy organizations or organizations that don't feel good about themselves are afraid of strangers. When I went out in the field, people gave me the benefit of the doubt. They said, "Help us develop a system, and then we'll see whether it's going to work." When I find learners in an organization, that's a sign of health.

Finally, when I went to the Central Office, almost everyone in headquarters had been down in the trenches. This group was not going to bring in a consultant to do their work for them, or get big books of strategic plans that lay on the shelf. These people said, "We have to make it meaningful for the people in the trenches," and they knew that because they'd been there.

So there was a realistic base on which to build. And those five things I mentioned do not hold in most organizations.

Something I see as unique about the organization is its family orientation—not just your own family, but thinking of everyone else in the Bureau as a family member. Yet, the near future is going to be such an explosive period of growth that this tradition of family is going to come under some strain.

I'm not a sociologist, but my sense is that the really healthy concept of family is the extended family, not just defined by bloodlines but by who can contribute. Networking is not only healthy in organizations, it's healthy in families. The family concept for the Bureau is being extended out to the National Institute of Corrections, to the American Correctional Association, to people like me being invited in.

Human resources is the essence of the modern-day concept of the organizational family. Not the chart with the little boxes, but the living blood and soul of people staying in touch, having differences, and ironing them out. And making sure that the family is not just defined at the Central Office.

The question of how fast it grows makes a difference in terms of how you "recruit" people to come into the family. When I bring you into my family, I let you know what the rules, procedures, and values are. I'm not just trying to fill up the bedrooms; if I do that, I'm running a boarding house. The key is for you and me, as family members, to have some agreement about what the boundaries are. Sometimes the boundaries may change. And almost all the great families I know have differences, arguments, and conflicts, loaded with emotion, over fundamentals. What I see happening in the Bureau is not a restrictive definition of family. A good example is the way managers are systematically starting to be developed to be leaders of the new family.

In terms of mobility, 10 or 15 years ago, if they said to you, "move," then you moved. Now they give some options, priority lists, they are aware of two-professional and single-parent families, of the growth of women as an important resource. That says to me that the Bureau is making sure that the family stays healthy and growing, but still anchored into fundamental values about what it means to be a correctional officer, to be held responsible for taking care of the "orphans" of society.

You can't do strategic planning by making people work over their lunch hours, or Saturday mornings, or at night.

It's interesting to think about what corrections should be, as opposed to what most people have in mind—that somehow the correctional system ought to be able to fix what none of the other institutions of society has been able to fix, and if we don't do that, we're not doing our job.

The Bureau of Prisons in the next 10 years is going to be asked to fix a lot of things, and many of them it won't be able to fix. But you can't fix anything until you fix yourself. If you take control of your own future, you may be able to take care of some demands that external stakeholders have on you. You'll be in a position to negotiate, to bargain, and maybe even have something to say about fundamental policy directions and the philosophical underpinnings of the policies. But if you can't take care of yourself, or if you don't have an anchor in terms of where you're going, people will keep laying things on you, and before you know it, your problems will be so overwhelming that you won't have time to fix the problems you have now.

That leads to a question about the effects of strategic planning on the local level. How does the average correctional officer, cook foreman, or warehouse worker get involved in the process in a way that makes sense to him or her?

Once again, five ways. Number one: you have to reward them for being part of the process. I was just at the associate wardens' conference in Denver, and they gave rewards and awards to people who have been playing roles in strategic planning. When people see there are rewards for it, they'll start to believe it's real.

Second, down on the line, the last thing people understand is rhetoric. If they're going to be involved, you have to convince them. If you tell them you want them to be part of the process, it doesn't mean you have to fill all their recommendations, but you have to prove that their recommendations are taken seriously.

Third, strategic planning is not just a top-down thing, it's a bottom-up thing. Certainly headquarters has to set or define the larger framework, but the people in the field must be convinced that it's going to make a difference in their lives.

Fourth, you can't do strategic planning by making people work over their lunch hours, or Saturday mornings, or at night. If I start to penalize you for being part of the process, by saying something is important, but you can't do it in your work day, it's not going to be real. It sounds simple, but I know organizations that "have it done" by making people do it over their lunch.

Finally, you have to have a cheerleader. That means J. Michael Quinlan, the Executive Staff, wardens, associate wardens—people who are visible as power symbols. They have to reach out and convince people, "we need your commitment." As I said earlier, it's not authority that gets it done. The way to get commitment is for people to see

leaders throughout the organization who are committed themselves. That means cheerleading not in the empty rhetorical sense, but in terms of the future of the family, the community, the values, and the pride.

Looking at what you've seen at the Bureau over the past couple of years, what do you see for the near future?

The Bureau is reaching the critical stage now. At the last wardens' conference, I heard Mike Quinlan say, "The transition is over." Strategic planning is now a solid part of the structure, the policymaking processes, and the culture of the Bureau of Prisons. In the beginning, it's slow. For the first 2 years, there was a lot of dialogue. It's never really over, but it's now part of the system. Now it has to be made real.

The tough part is coming: strategic implementation. How it's done in El Reno is not necessarily how it has to be done in Otisville; they have their own subcultures. There is no one "best" way.

I see several problems. First, there is uneven development throughout the system. Those lagging behind in terms of strategic planning have to be encouraged to get up to at least bare minimum in the next 12 months. There will always be unevenness in the process, but there has to be a "safety net."

Second, rewards for people involved have to become much more visible to everybody in the organization. Performance awards, merit increases, prizes, whatever—there has to be an effort to make those things more relevant.

Third, I think the future leadership of the Bureau must look at strategic planning as being as important as personnel management, sanitation, and everything else. The leadership conferences are a smart move, but I think strategic planning should be highlighted more clearly, relative to the other things leaders are being asked to do. Leadership in the future is a strategic endeavor.

Strategic problems are never *solved*, they are *managed*, and when you manage them, the process just keeps continuing.

Finally, recruitment. The Bureau is going to grow so quickly, that unless the leaders of the future are made ready for strategic planning, some will be promoted into positions that are beyond their capacity. One thing that's needed is a little more focus on the new leadership in terms of making strategic planning an anchor.

How do the institutional and perhaps even departmental strategic plans relate to the Bureau's overall planning? Is there a necessary relationship?

The process is simple, whether it's done at the Central Office or down at Talladega. You have to do an environmental scan. What are the major external issues, problems, and concerns facing us outside our particular local prison? It could be economics, community relations, recruitment, or whatever. Then you do an internal scan. What things are holding us back, and what are the strengths we can build on?

You look at those together and decide what are the five or six most important issues you're faced with, and how they rank. Then you look at each issue and say, "What are our options for dealing with these?" Building new beds, double-bunking, more education, and so on.

After your option generation phase, you say, "Well, out of all the things we could do, improving our educational system would best deal with this particular problem." That is the implementation stage. "We have to hire more teachers, we have to consult with local colleges, we need more self-study videos."

Then you perform a realistic analysis of the options relative to the costs. As you start to implement an option, you have milestones to measure how well you're doing. And at the end of the year, you do an evaluation. "Have we done it? What have we learned from this?" When you find out, your learning process starts all over again.

The thing about strategic planning that drives some people a little nuts is that strategic problems are never *solved*, they are *managed*, and when you manage them, the process just keeps continuing. But it's the same process at the Executive Staff level and at the Food Service Department in Talladega.

Say your problem this year is getting people through the food line fast enough. As you start to think strategically, you find that if you move people through the line faster, it may mean you need fewer people to clean up. Things start to fit together. Next year the problem might be seating, because you're getting overcrowded. Just because you solve the speed problem, it doesn't mean strategic planning is finished.

So it becomes a way to generate solutions for problems that may not even exist yet.

It's even a process for problem definition. Most people hide what their real problems are. If you don't do team building and other things that go with strategic planning, people aren't going to be honest with each other. You can't have Medical doing strategic planning and not have Food Service doing it. Problem definition is one of the hardest parts of organizational life.

Is there a real difference between people problems and environmental problems?

My sense is that they are so interrelated that it's almost impossible to separate them. The worst part of the type of strategic planning that I see in textbooks is that it's dealt with as if it's a formal, logical system that you do rationally, objectively, and measurably. To me, that's the tip of the iceberg. Underneath that are ego needs, power realities in the organization or in the political environment, and group dynamics. That's why you have to build trust, empower people. In too many organizations people in charge think that power is finite—they give you a little bit but keep it close to them. But the really powerful leaders and managers understand that power is exponential. The more powerful everyone in the organization feels, the more powerful the organization is.

Everyone has some power or autonomy over their own job. Their manager can't do it for them.

Absolutely. The other thing is, all organizations are political entities in my perspective. There's an old saying in management, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." There is no objectivity in organizational life, but we can work on a "win-win" kind of endeavor. This year, it may be more important for your department to get extra resources than my department. But if you and I understand that we both can win, then we can negotiate. That's what great politics is all about.

If you and I understand that we both can win, then we can negotiate. That's what great politics is all about.

When you're operating in a strategic planning framework, it's usually done in meetings and groups. Thus, you must build teams where people have some skills and understanding of group dynamics so that everyone is negotiating within the same framework. The wardens are one of the power anchors; you acknowledge their power, and that's why the Wardens Advisory Groups were set up. The power people have to believe that they will continue to have critical power in terms of where the organization is going.

Always keeping the long view in mind.

Without ever overlooking the short reality. There are some who keep the long view in mind when everything around them is crumbling. These are rhetorical visionaries. You have to have that tension between the long-term, the intermediate, and the short-term. In the short term, if you're not careful, the urgent will always drive out the important. The short-term needs out in the field have to be made congruent with the long-term future of the Bureau of Prisons. If you recruit the wrong kind of people over the next 5 years, I don't care what the vision is, it will fall flat on its tail—unless you conscientiously, on a day-by-day basis, recruit the kind of people who are going to be compatible with the strategic management design of the Bureau of Prisons.

A strange thing is happening in government. In this period of cutback management, down-sizing, and cost containment, everybody seems to be talking about strategic management, but very few are doing it. That's why I have great admiration for the Bureau of Prisons. Talking about it is easy. Doing it is hard, tense, but creative. One of the first signs for me that strategic planning is working is when the language in an organization starts to change. I find that a creative, proactive mindset is starting to dominate at key points in the Bureau of Prisons.

The principle of making fundamental quality decisions in productive organizations in the next 10 years is that ability to do "less with less"—to do the essential things as best you can, and not continue to do "more with less" to the point where you do everything in a mediocre way. That's why, knowing the Bureau of Prisons as I do, I admire their understanding of what their cultural anchors are. So that when they say "less with less," they really mean more quality in terms of what it means to be the first-class correctional organization in the United States. And that takes courage. ■