

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Introduction

In the preface to *Fulfilling the Promise*, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt called the National Wildlife Refuge System “a hidden jewel among our nation’s public lands.” The spectacular terrain, sparkling waters, and diverse habitats that make up this Refuge System and support our treasured wildlife are borne of a rich and proud history: one which unfolded as bold and daring visionaries struck out to challenge the establishment and create something better and greater than ourselves. These visionaries include Teddy Roosevelt, who used the Antiquities Act to protect lands Congress would not; Rachel Carson, who raised the collective awareness of a nation; and Aldo Leopold, whose constantly evolving ideas gave birth to a land ethic that has become the cornerstone of our conservation ideals. Each of these leaders said and did things that were not well accepted by establishment, but which have become essential to our conservation legacy. As we move forward to create a vision for National Wildlife Refuge System’s next century, we must remember this history and challenge ourselves to think beyond our current bounds.

Our treasured Refuge System faces an uncertain future. Society and landscapes are changing; threats to natural resources are escalating faster than we can react to them; federal budgets are declining; and pressures on employees are mounting. Our historical practices may not serve us well in a future of changing conditions, yet in this context we are charged with charting a Vision for Leadership and Organizational Excellence within the Refuge System. At the heart of such a vision is ensuring that National Wildlife Refuges remain a cornerstone of America’s conservation estate; that we work with our partners to strategically address priority resource objectives; and that we maintain functional landscapes that support viable fish and wildlife populations. To achieve this, we envision a future where a culture of continuous and comprehensive leadership development is evident internal and external to the organization; where conservation professionals covet careers in the Refuge System because of our mission and the quality of our leadership; and where organizational excellence allows efficient and effective achievement of our mission through streamlined business practices, integrated information sharing, and high performance.

The task at hand is not easy. We must remain visionary and dynamic to meet the challenges ahead. Dr. Stephen Covey said, “We must live out of our imaginations and not our history.” Let us build on our strong foundation, remember that change is the only constant, and continue to evolve to achieve our mission for both current and future generations of Americans.

Perspectives on Leadership and Organizational Excellence

Fulfilling the Promise placed an unequivocal priority on leadership development: “*Recommendation L1: Make leadership development **the** priority of the System and the Service*” (emphasis added.) This recommendation remains foremost in our Vision, as leadership development is never truly “accomplished.” Despite our best efforts to anticipate and embrace change, today’s Refuge System workforce – and certainly the workforce of America – is constantly evolving ahead of us. These and other dynamic conditions make leadership development a constant and critical factor in the success of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Leadership development is integral at all levels of the organization and is not limited by job series or grade level. All our employees are entitled, and encouraged, to pursue such opportunities.

We envision a Refuge System whose leaders believe that employees are its most valuable resource, and who adopt a continuous learning culture as a critical means of conservation relevancy and survival. This culture will be central to that of the Refuge System, and leadership development through employee training, continuing education, and professional development will be modeled by our leaders and viewed as mission-critical investments, not as “collateral duty” or as a distraction from “real work.”

Our leadership cannot be bound by the limits of our organization, nor can we afford to look solely within to find it. Our leadership is needed within the larger conservation community as we work with our partners and communities; and we must look beyond the Refuge System for those visionaries who stand to influence the future of conservation. Valuing a diversity of personal and professional experience, leaders will seek out excellence from within *and* beyond the Refuge System and will encourage rising leaders to broaden their experience in both realms.

Leadership and organizational excellence are inextricably linked. The latter begins with leaders who embrace change and new ideas, anticipate opportunities, remain transparent, and take well calculated risks in a way that efficiently achieves the mission while evolving towards new challenges and opportunities. Organizational excellence will result from clear business practices that allow efficient and consistent operations within a Refuge *System* and that allow focus on the highest priority goals and objectives. Our organizational excellence will reduce administrative burdens, prevent information overload, and effectively share institutional knowledge. Through achieving this, we will improve efficiency to facilitate better stewardship of the Public’s natural and fiscal resources.

In this future, the Refuge System will be the premier conservation organization in the world and the benchmark by which other land management organizations measure success. Conservation professionals will covet careers in the Refuge System, not only because of its critical mission, but also because of the quality of its leadership and the efficiency of its practices. We will have a clear vision; streamlined business practices; integrated information sharing; great resilience in the face of change; a motivated workforce; a positive, welcoming, and inclusive culture; and high performance towards specific goals and objectives. Our customers will be loyal and supportive, and employees will feel challenged yet fulfilled.

The Future of Leadership and Organizational Excellence

Leadership Excellence

Leaders within the Refuge System will lead from a foundation based on integrity and sound land stewardship in all that they do in service to others. They will be adaptive and visionary, inspiring employees and partners to exceed what is needed and seek what is possible. They will possess agility, passion, and exceptional communication skills. They will be skilled in the use of technology to enhance communications and overall management. They will model and expect

accountability of themselves and staff. Finally, those leaders will be committed to the development of the next generation of conservation stewards.

Leadership development will not be seen as a “collateral duty,” but will be central to the culture of the Refuge System. Employees will serve in an environment that values openness and transparency and the contributions each employee makes to the fulfillment of our mission. Leaders will value diversity of personal and professional experience. As such, they will seek out leadership excellence from beyond the Refuge System and will encourage rising leaders to broaden their experience within and outside of the Refuge System. Innovation and well reasoned risk taking will be embraced and rewarded. Change will continue, and our leaders will anticipate it to make positive changes that benefit fish and wildlife and their habitats.

Conservation Leadership

Employees will be well-versed in the principles of strategic habitat conservation and will help lead the larger conservation community to set objectives, design conservation models, deliver conservation on the ground, monitor to determine results, and test our assumptions through targeted research. We will be committed to operating in a collaborative and adaptive framework. Refuge system leaders at all levels will be effective members and beneficiaries of collaborative landscape conservation cooperatives, where shared goals within a landscape are attained by filling critical information gaps that then allow us to more effectively target our on-the-ground delivery efforts.

Leadership Development

Our leaders will embrace the need for leadership development as central to the fulfillment of our mission. They will model the way and provide the necessary resources for leadership development, including encouraging employees to attend developmental programs outside the Service as well as at NCTC. Leaders will become personally involved in employee development programs, serving as instructors, mentors and coaches. They will support experiential developmental opportunities such as details, shadow assignments, and job swaps; and create a culture in which these developmental opportunities are welcomed and expected.

The Service continually leads the government in large part thanks to curriculum provided by the National Conservation Training Center. The Service provides two exceptional leadership development programs with Stepping Up To Leadership and the Advanced Leadership Development Program, and our employees also participate in the National Conservation Leadership Institute. Their excellent reputation is demonstrated through demand far exceeding slots available. The Service also recognizes that leadership development programs are integral in all aspects of the organization, including entry level positions.

Organizational Excellence

Organizational excellence begins with leaders who embrace change and new ideas. They will anticipate opportunities, remain transparent, and take well calculated risks. The Refuge System will excel in our rapidly changing world. Our leaders will be flexible and adaptive. A continuous learning culture will be viewed as no less than a critical means of conservation relevancy, and indeed survival.

Changing times call for a change in business management. The Refuge System will have clear business practices to operate efficiently and consistently. Commitment to consistency by all the regions will ensure a *Refuge System* is maintained. This is particularly important in the areas of budgeting and work planning. The Refuge System will also focus on specific goals and recognize that we cannot accomplish everything put before us. We will aggressively prioritize our potential workload to ensure that we are accomplishing those items that will allow us to meet the highest priority goals and objectives. We will provide our workforce with the resources necessary for them to accomplish these items and provide them with the safest possible work environment. We will look to solve information overload and avoid unnecessary administrative burdens that sap morale and hamper productivity.

Increased Productivity

Antiquated data systems will be replaced with new technology where data can be shared and managed effectively to multiply its value and reduce or eliminate redundancy. Improved knowledge management systems must be developed to allow for more timely and effective sharing of scientific information, accomplishments, and needs both internally and with our external partners. Strong information technology support will be needed, with expertise provided by employees skilled in information technology management. While there are challenges associated with new information systems, these can be overcome with strong commitment from leaders. The Refuge System will become more productive and efficient with communication, using new social media tools, web-based communications, and online training. New communication technology will increase the Refuge System's productivity, but should not supplant essential personal contact. Being able to meet in person to better connect and build trust will enhance employee morale, public satisfaction, and greater fish, wildlife and habitat conservation.

Consequences

If we fail to commit ourselves to a future of leadership and leadership development excellence, we will not fulfill our mission. In the words of leadership development author and speaker, Dr. John Maxwell, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." We will lose influence within the Service and the conservation community at large. Employees will leave the Refuge System and seek jobs that provide a more positive and supportive work climate. This will result in the need to constantly replenish the talent and experience pool. Leaders will unnecessarily spend more time on fixing employee problems than leading and recognizing success and excellence. While its compelling mission may sustain some Refuge System employees and partners, management excellence will be increasingly difficult to achieve. Overall, our ability will be compromised by our failure to provide the best possible leaders and developmental culture within the Refuge System.

If the Refuge System is not flexible and adaptive, following new business practices, embracing new technology, or providing the opportunity for its leaders and employees to participate in continual learning opportunities, we will fail to accomplish our mission. As we strive for leadership and organizational excellence, we not only make each individual more efficient in their position, but also ensure the success of the Refuge System, provide higher employee morale, and maintain trust and respect from our partners.

A Vision for Leadership and Organizational Excellence

Strong leadership is necessary to achieve organizational excellence and excellent organizations continually strive to develop strong leadership skills in all members. In an excellent organization, the many functional responsibilities work together to achieve a central mission while continuing to grow and evolve to meet new challenges. Excellent organizations have a vision, streamlined business practices, integrated information sharing, great resilience, motivated workforces, a distinct and positive culture, and high performance towards specific goals and objectives. In an excellent organization, employees are satisfied and fulfilled. Organizational excellence is an overarching "state of being" that cuts across all aspects of the Refuge system and of the Service as a whole. Our vision for the future is that we will be an agency of strong and talented leaders who achieve our mission better and more efficiently because of our excellence.

Because our refuges are the premier national system of conservation lands, cornerstones of a larger conservation estate, we will lead and manage them in the context of the landscapes in which they exist. To meet the conservation community's shared goal for functional landscapes with viable fish and wildlife populations, we will manage the system and participate in collaborative partnerships to support specific landscape-scale goals and objectives. By seeing ourselves as part of a bigger "whole" we will most effectively do our part to manage and conserve habitats and species across the landscapes in which they exist. We will focus our human and fiscal resources strategically on our priorities, and we will manage existing refuges and acquire new conservation lands to meet specific goals for habitats and species. We will also be better positioned to use the Refuge system to ensure fish and wildlife populations have the opportunity to respond and adapt with changing climates.

As the world's premier scientifically-based wildlife conservation agency, the Service and the Refuge System have focused on technical credibility, and we will continue to be known in this way. We are recognized leaders in habitat management techniques and tools, including the use of prescribed fire. We have many talented employees emerging as leaders in biological planning, conservation design and modeling, and monitoring. We will support those scientific endeavors as we know they are the foundation on which we build our adaptive conservation delivery activities.

In addition, we must foster an earnest culture through increased focus on leadership competencies. Truly, the conservation leader of the future is not the same as it was twenty years ago. While some of the intangible values of leadership – honesty, integrity, trustworthiness – persist, there are other values leaders must unequivocally exhibit. Our leaders will inspire others, thereby increasing employee motivation, satisfaction, and their contributions to conservation. Leaders will foster a positive work environment where wise risks are encouraged, mistakes are tolerated, brainstorming and innovation are rewarded, learning is supported, and employees are regularly recognized for their achievements. Leaders will put their employee's concerns, work/life balance, and developmental needs first. Thus, they recognize that mentoring and coaching is one of the best uses of their time. As being an effective leader can at times be difficult, leaders will need strength in conflict resolution, will have courage to risk potential failure, and will have strong support from others as a result of their demonstrated performance. Tomorrow's leaders will be more aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses, and in

effectively leading others they will model behaviors of continued self-discovery and improvement.

Great leaders develop others, give up control, and give more credit than they receive. Leadership practices will be demonstrated both internal and external to the organization; leaders will seek out partnerships with others to achieve common conservation goals. The Refuge System will recognize these benefits and seek to ensure this culture permeates the organization. As supervisors and managers maintain a focus on employees and cultivating leadership, the Service will be the premier conservation organization in the world and the benchmark by which other land management organizations measure success.

Strong leaders foster a culture of transparency and thrive in the face of uncertainty. Leaders in the future will look at change as an opportunity rather than a threat. They will accept and embrace evolving conditions and will use communication to effectively lead others through difficult times. They will be best characterized as doing the right things in an environment of constant change.

Our managers will do more than create an inspiring environment. They will ensure employees have the best business practices in place to allow them to excel. Since Refuge System employees have broad and diverse demands on them daily, organizational excellence will allow improved efficiency to facilitate better stewardship of the Public's natural resources. We will have in place the correct workforce, improved business policies and practices, effective and current technology, and a way to manage knowledge. Striving for organizational excellence will allow us to focus energies on other items such as leadership development and the delivery of the Service's mission.

Simply put, employing business practices that improve our efficiency will help us to be more effective. Evaluation and improvement of current business practices and policies are critical to achieving our mission. To enable better fulfillment of our mission, leaders will strategically identify the most important business practice improvements to implement.

Increased retirements and changing demographics over the next decade will create opportunities to bring new perspectives and greater diversity of thought to the workforce. It will be critical to transfer the intellectual capital of today's leaders to those who follow. Managing knowledge and information effectively will guarantee a skilled and efficient workforce for the future.

Leading Sustainability by Example. Sustainability is integral to our mission. Practices that limit our carbon footprint complement our fish and wildlife conservation mission and make evident our commitment to sustainability of both the human and natural landscapes. We must be a leader in Greening the Government efforts, leading change by our actions and serving as an example to others.

Managing our People. Leaders truly embrace the practice of treating employees as our most valuable resource – above all else. Employee training, continuing education, and professional development will be viewed as mission-critical, not as a distraction from “real work.” Leaders

will assess the emerging challenges of conservation and strive to recruit and develop employees that possess the tools and resources needed to achieve our mission.

Our supervisors and managers will welcome leadership at every level and value a diversity of thought. They will ensure that the Refuge System, and indeed the entire agency, is known as a workplace that welcomes employees from all backgrounds. We will be the premier employer of choice for those that share our conservation mission because our workplaces will be collaborative, constructive, welcoming, creative, and fun places where people from all portions of our citizenry can find a home. By creating this culture, we will attract and retain employees that represent the diversity that exists in the American public. With a diverse and committed workforce, we will capture the diversity of thought and perspectives that may be uniquely presented by different cultures, experiences, and backgrounds, and we will excel in engaging all cultures in our mission and ensure that our mission remains relevant to the public. We must work together with those state and federal agencies and organizations that share our conservation mission to create this professional culture and to implement successful recruiting efforts that will ensure our collective conservation workforce represents Americans from all walks of life.

The Service has effective recruiting tools in place. Programs such as the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) and Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) are widely used throughout the Service. Others are available and successful but often underutilized in recruiting. These include the Federal Career Intern Program and programs that target persons with disabilities and veterans. Presently, there is no formal Service or Refuge System-wide mentoring program which could help coach and guide employees towards greater leadership roles.

Just as leadership is welcomed at every level, this organization remains indebted by the essential contributions of the dedicated workers who facilitate day-to-day achievement of our conservation mission. Consider the critical role administrative workers play in bringing on temporary and seasonal staff; the interpretive and environmental education programs given by the student working on an internship who reaches hundreds of visitors over the summer, or the habitat management that is achieved by the wage grade workers who repair, maintain, and operate our equipment. These dedicated, innovative and resilient employees are the face of the agency and the reason for our success. They each play a critical role in achieving our mission.

Workplace Safety. In valuing our employees' dedication, passion, and contributions to our mission, we place workplace safety at the pinnacle of all that we do. While working on heavy equipment, operating watercraft, and working in the backcountry are inherently hazardous duties, we will apply hazard analyses, such as Risk Assessment Planning, to all that we do. We will provide our employees with the training and equipment to perform each task in the safest possible manner. Our employees will consider safety first and foremost, every day, every time.

Protecting America's Wildlife Heritage. The first line of defense for protecting our natural, cultural, and historic resources as well as our visitors, employees, and property is a Refuge Law Enforcement Officer. These Officers are often the first people visitors come in contact with on our Refuges and many times are the face of the agency. Refuge Officers not only maintain safety and a high level of policing skills, but they also interact with the public due to their

visibility and accessibility. Refuge Officers work diligently at providing the public with safe experiences on Refuges while pursuing, apprehending and prosecuting those who violate Refuge regulations. Staffing models for Refuge Law Enforcement should be strategically drawn to protect our most precious resources and interact with the greatest number of visitors. Interagency agreements and training should be implemented to qualify other land management officers to protect our refuges in the absence of a Refuge Officer.

The following section contains recommendations for achieving true Leadership and Organizational Excellence.

Leadership

Creating strategies to motivate employees, increase morale, and create a culture of continuous improvement.

A primary goal of supervisors and managers is to support individual development, providing the tools necessary for success. These supervisors and leaders create an environment that fosters self-motivation, high morale, continuous improvement, and values each employee's contribution to the team. As part of this, leaders should encourage brainstorming and innovation as a part of routine responsibilities and let the best ideas win. Furthermore, leadership is not synonymous with title. The Refuge System should strive to ensure we are developing leadership skills and abilities at every level of the organization.

Recommendations

1. *Make leadership development THE priority of the Refuge System.*
2. *Update Service Manual chapter 230 FW7 "Leadership Development for the National Wildlife Refuge System" to incorporate the recommendations in this vision document.*
3. *Mandate the use of the service's Leadership Competency Development Model and the NWRS Leadership Pathways report as part of all employees development planning and IDP implementation.*
4. *Provide multiple career pathways for all job series, including professional, technical, and administrative positions, to allow for advancement with and without the requirement of becoming a supervisor and develop a broader pathway to becoming a Refuge Manager.*
5. *Develop and implement a mentoring/coaching program for the Refuge System.*
6. *Ensure all employees are valued and provided opportunities to grow and remain within the Refuge System and Service without regard to race, ethnic background, gender, or other non-mission related characteristics.*

Management and Supervision:

Supervisors must have the courage, skills and support to address long-standing failures. A history of hiring managers for their technical skills has too frequently resulted in inefficiencies due to issues that have their basis in people and management skills. The Refuge System should strive to ensure that we are developing leadership skills and abilities throughout the workforce and not simply in those who hold “leadership” positions. Receiving and providing effective performance feedback and taking action of this feedback are key components effective supervision and organizational success. Effective supervisors must provide for the training and development of all employees but should also be supported when they must remove employees who clearly demonstrate an unwillingness or inability to meet performance standards. All employees, including supervisors and managers, must be held accountable for contributing to this culture of success.

Recommendations

1. *Invest in and mandate coaching and conflict management training for all supervisors.*
2. *Mandate specific comments on each supervisor’s performance in “Developing Others” as per the Supervisory Benchmark Standards found in the Supervisory Employee Performance Appraisal Plan.*
3. *Select and evaluate managers and supervisors based not only on technical skills and abilities but also on leadership competencies, skills, and performance.*
4. *Ensure all supervisors and managers receive specific written feedback from employees, peers, and supervisors on an annual basis.*
5. *Hold supervisors accountable for providing accurate and timely feedback to employees about their performance and working with employees on improving those areas in need of improvement.*

Agency Commitment to Leadership Development:

The leadership of the Fish and Wildlife Service (both past and present) has made a commitment to develop world class training opportunities for the employees of the Service as embodied by the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) and its Stepping Up To Leadership (SUTL) and Advanced Leadership Development Programs (ALDP). Employees of the Refuge System should fully avail themselves of these training programs while always looking for innovative ways to build upon our current leadership training to include more fully utilizing open enrollment leadership and supervisory development programs offered by NCTC and other training providers.

Recommendations

1. *Make it a Refuge System priority to increase Refuge employee applications to and selection for existing Service leadership programs such as SUTL and ALDP as well as the National Conservation Leadership Institute.*

2. *Mandate enrollment in Project Leader Academy for all new refuge or complex managers within the first 12 months of service as a refuge/complex manager.*
3. *Support increased participation in open enrollment leadership training programs for all employees including courses from NCTC and other providers.*

Organizational Excellence

Succession and Information Management:

The Service has a culture of longstanding vacancies and little overlap between outgoing and arriving employees. Recognizing that budgetary restraints make this difficult to address, we must do a better job of transitioning information between employees and partners.

Recommendation:

1. *Develop and mandate system-wide leadership succession processes to ensure learning and knowledge is passed from the departing employee to the successor.*

Ensure that the Organization is Lean, Nimble and Priority-Focused:

Excellent organizations operate at peak efficiency by ensuring that the workforce is appropriately sized and placed to do the job at hand. Excellent organizations are also able to change direction quickly when circumstances dictate that change is necessary and prioritize mission-critical work when challenges exceed the fiscal and human resources necessary to address them.

Recommendations

1. *Conduct a nationwide study of refuge system support functions and services and implement changes designed to provide a more efficient service to field stations and the system as a whole.*
2. *Fully support and utilize Friends groups and volunteers to help us accomplish our mission and ensure they receive the recognition they deserve.*
3. *Mandate an annual supervisory review of each Refuge unit's activities to ensure everything they are doing is mission critical and should eliminate or establish a prioritized hierarchy of those that are not mission critical.*

Eliminate Redundancy and Outdated Work Processes:

Excellent organizations seek to do their work as efficiently and effectively as possible. Many within the Refuge System feel that they are distracted from accomplishing the mission of the System due to inefficient and unnecessary administrative demands.

Recommendations

1. *Develop information management systems that anticipate routine and ad hoc data requests to minimize disruption and time spent by each refuge in responding to information needs.*
2. *Require that all administrative and work processes are clearly explained to employees, including the purposes for and the benefits derived by completing the process.*
3. *Develop and require consistent business practices throughout the Refuge System and FWS as a whole.*

Hiring the Best and Brightest: Recruiting from Current and Future Generations:

Excellent organizations recruit and retain excellent employees. Historically, the Refuge System has drawn employees largely from individuals who had a direct connection with and understanding of the natural world. Future employees may have spent less time outdoors and more time with electronic media than those who have historically been attracted to the Service. Many of these prospective employees may not naturally think of government or National Wildlife Refuge System employment as a career. The Service and the System need to develop and execute innovative approaches to find and recruit the best and brightest of future employees. These employees should reflect the full diversity of the American people.

Recommendations

1. *Ensure that the incoming pool of employees are from diverse backgrounds so that we assemble a future workforce representative of the American public.*
2. *Utilize new media technology and the new media savvy of our younger employees to educate and recruit a diverse pool of employees and better reach the American people about the mission of the Service and the System.*
3. *Work with colleges, universities and technical schools to build the knowledge base of future employees while developing programs that develop mission critical skills and abilities.*
4. *Establish, communicate and track the current baseline and future goals for employee recruitment and retention, especially within specific functions like law enforcement and visitor services where recruitment has been problematic .*
5. *Explore housing options for entry level employees that support mobility and quality of life issues and diverse quality of life issues.*
6. *Implement, support and communicate the Deputies' group recommendations related to what constitutes appropriate "nationally significant experience" to be considered for higher-level*

leadership positions. Consideration will be given to certain complex field assignments, Regional Office positions, and combinations of diverse multi-month details to the Washington office.