



A View from a Private Sector/Public Sector Planner

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Consider the following headlines in 2012:

“Zappo’s Founder Tony Hsieh Spends \$350 Million of His Own Money to Make Sin City (Las Vegas) a Start-Up Hub” (BusinessWeek)

“50 Most Innovative Companies - James Corner Field Operations Redesigns Urban Industrial Remnants” (Fast Company)

“PPACA (National Health Reform) Opens Door for States to Privatize Medicaid” (Kaiser Foundation)

“Hampton Roads Fortune 500 CEOs Team Up With Cities to Explore Shared Service Pilot” (Virginian-Pilot)

Every day, news and media channels abound with examples of new players, especially in the private sector, taking the reins of areas traditional managed by urban and regional planners. It is easy to interpret these significant changes as evidence that our discipline is no longer relevant and serves a trivial function in today’s society.

I feel the reverse is true – and planning is more relevant than ever! However, the profession needs to re-invent itself to influence and adopt new and emerging models of inciting change in society today. The planning discipline is not alone in its need for re-invention. Institutions and endeavors ranging from journalism to higher education to finance are seeking new models of engagement and relevance in today’s rapidly changing world. The planning field is evolving from more centralized centers of subject matter expertise to models that influence through multiple levels of leadership and collaboration among experts. Fortunately, planners are particularly well equipped to lead and influence change in society. The planning profession’s core competencies – (1) managing multiple constituencies, (2) anticipating dominoes/interdependencies, and (3) taking the long-term view – are core tenets and areas of training not encouraged in many professions, let alone implemented.

Planning no longer just happens through federal, state, or local planning offices. Planners need to consider alternative “sites of influence” from which to lead and effectuate change – companies from the Fortune 500 to start-ups, non-profits, and web entities. Expanding relationships with these alternative organizations opens new opportunities for new forms of collaboration, information sharing, and leadership. As one example, public-private partnerships are an evolving and successful structure to bring together private sector resources that can address public sector challenges. Private sector partners who understand and have experience with the public sector are as important as public sector partners who understand and have experience in the private sector.

Consider Medicaid and Medicare, two public healthcare programs managed by the private sector. Signed into law in 1965, these programs cover over 30% of Americans, and will increase significantly with full implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2014.

Over two-thirds of Medicaid beneficiaries are covered through private sector managed care and insurance programs. One such company is Amerigroup, a Fortune 500 company with only government clients. I served as their Chief Marketing Officer, which proved to be a unique opportunity to experience how the public and private sectors can work together to achieve a common goal – improving the quality and affordability of healthcare for the poor and the elderly. The experience emphasized for me the importance of bringing planning principles such as the three mentioned above into everyday business practice. The company has its own well-developed, strategic planning process, not relegated to the periphery, but instead led by engaged company executives.

Managing multiple constituencies is a hallmark of public sector managed care, ranging from policy-makers, the medical community, advocates and adversaries, to the patients and members themselves. One solution to create continuous private, consumer, and public sector stakeholder

engagement was establishment of the company’s “National Advisory Board on Improving Health Care for Seniors and People with Disabilities,” which was unique for a private company, yet common in the public sector.

Anticipating dominoes/interdependencies is also a perpetual issue in the private sector and one that is frustrating for all audiences – i.e. how to address, politically, culturally, and programmatically, the complex but siloed web of social services, housing, transportation, and education for recipients.

Taking the long-term view, despite short-term state budget challenges, was equally important in considering funding, medical programs that address the patient holistically, and long-term services that support consumer independence. The company coalesced internal program development staff with external advocates and policy experts to design new systems of care that are both cost-effective and simplified for consumers to navigate.

So how can the practice and profession of planning exert its leadership in the future? Graduate planning programs are uniquely situated to bring together thought leaders, practitioners, and students to cross-pollinate ideas and applications for building the relevancy of the profession. For example, programs can create curricula, task forces, and/or freestanding “centers for public sector innovation,” patterned on centers of entrepreneurship or innovation found in business schools. These programs would encourage students to seek internships and work experience in the private sector and other “sites of influence,” especially those companies which work through a public-private model. They could develop and implement training curricula in the core competencies and supplement with outside adjunct faculty and mentors/coaches who continue to train on these techniques in multiple settings. Programs could establish joint degree programs across the university, such as joint planning and business, or joint planning and health sciences. They could assist graduating students with placements in non-traditional planning jobs and careers, such as corporate development and strategic planning, privatized IT service companies, and venture capital/development organizations. They could also seed fund and provide technical support to start-up companies focused on social entrepreneurship to solve public sector problems.

Planning by its nature is visionary. The planning profession, and the people it attracts, must lead in bringing these ideals and practices to today’s rapidly changing world.

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