Introduction

For 84 years it has been the business of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) to work for the protection and improvement of US national parks. NPCA was established at the behest of the first director of the US National Park Service, Stephen Mather, the godfather of the concept of an organized government entity that would collectively manage national parks. Mather recognized that the parks would need a partner – many perhaps – that would work to counter the influence of politics on parks and work to promote and maintain the ideal when the men and women of the Service themselves could not. For 84 years, NPCA has remained true to Stephen Mather’s vision. NPCA has worked with hundreds of thousands of its members – millions over time – and literally millions of others to achieve preservation of critical lands, tell the story of the American spirit and fight against those who seek to denigrate, destroy, diminish or marginalize the parks. More recently, NPCA has focused on the adequate financing of park operations as one of the most critical barriers to park protection and improvement. The very history of NPCA has been a history of partnership with those interested in the preservation and growth and financial support of the National Park System and the park ideal.

The National Parks Business Plan Initiative -- A Model of Successful Partnership

For the past six years, NPCA has been engaged in a project to bring business tools to park managers and bring focus to the financial status of the parks. Called the National Parks Business Plan Initiative (BPI), the program has integrated business tools with more traditional park management expertise and utilized some of the brightest young minds in academia to create products that both tell the story of parks and detail sources and uses of park funds as well as outstanding park needs. To date, the program has involved more than 60 national parks, 30 universities and more than 100 graduate-level students. (More than one third of the students have been international students from Argentina, Austria, Canada, China, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Africa and the UK.) The project has been co-managed by NPCA and the National Park Service, with separate but integrated teams of managers at the non-profit, agency and park level with the single goal of producing business plans for the parks involved. For five of the six years, the program has been funded by a dozen philanthropies. In its sixth year, funding transitioned from philanthropy to the federal government.

BPI began with an idea that parks could benefit from a tool very common to private business, but unused and unfamiliar to park managers. Like business plans used world-wide to help private interests educate potential investors about the design of a business, its potential, the scope of current operations and need, the theory was that this tool could be used by parks to educate Congressional managers, the public and...
others about the financial status of parks. And, like business plans for private interests, the process of
developing park business plans could be used by the managers themselves to identify areas of
opportunity, inefficiency and potential refinement. After six years, the theory has been tested and proven
in the field and business plans are becoming nested in the culture of the National Park Service. As
important, the tenor of discussion of park needs has changed in Congress and among the public. Where
seldom discussed previously, discussion of the financial difficulties facing parks is now common and well
accepted. Congress is beginning to respond with additional federal support. Parks themselves are now
focusing on external opportunities for additional support and on areas of inefficiency for internal
improvement at the same time that the outlook for enhanced federal support is improving.

It has been a long road to get to this point. Managing the human dynamics of matching the vigor of young
business minds with traditional park management and the complexities of co-management between a
government agency and a non-profit has proven to be the critical factor in making the program a success.
BPI has provided a good window into the necessary dynamics of successful partnerships, teaching
several painful but many more highly productive lessons. In observing the rest of NPCA’s experience,
these lessons learned from a single project apply broadly, as hallmarks of success no matter the project
or place.

Five Hallmarks of Success

Although the technical tools and the knowledge, skills and abilities provided by young business minds
have been vital to producing the business plans themselves, success of the Business Plan Initiative has
had at least as much to do with recognition and management of human dynamics as with any other
factor. Without recognition of the human aspects of partnerships, good theories or new tools like the
business plan concept are unlikely to succeed, much less thrive. The lessons in human dynamics derived
from the Business Plan Initiative can be boiled down to just five:

Lesson #1: Patience Pays Dividends
For decades, financial stress has been building in the National Park System. While it is one of the better
funded systems in the world, it is also the most heavily used, with nearly 300 million visitors annually.
Wear and tear on the system is visible to line managers that work daily to patch leaks, channel visitors
and ensure the resources survive untrammeled. Seven years ago, the superintendent of Yellowstone
provoked outrage in the US Congress when he closed a single campground, citing lack of funds – a
$77,000 decision on a nearly $20 million budget. When challenged, it took Yellowstone months to gather
evidence to support the decision.

NPCA began the BPI partnership with the Park Service to resolve the kind of problem in explaining
financial status and need that Yellowstone exemplified. Bringing more than a dozen philanthropies to the
table to fund the summer work of business graduate students, the expectation on the part of NPCA and
our philanthropic supporters was that the program would take three years before business plans were
engrained in the agency as a standard part of doing business. It has been six years and the program is
not finished. More than 60 parks have completed plans, in a system of 388 parks, and only recently has
the Park Service communicated to its managers that business plans are becoming a standard part of park
management.

Taking more than twice as long as expected to begin to demonstrate broad-scale success has been
frustrating for NPCA and the philanthropies involved. Though our approach to the partnership has
remained the same – to work with the parks themselves to steadily build momentum and acceptance
park-by-park, the time it has taken for the agency to fully embrace the program has been a surprise.
Nonetheless, patience with the slow but steady progress on the part of agency managers, NPCA staff
and the organization’s funders has guaranteed that the approach is practical in a field context, is valued
by parks and is a living program, rather than a policy requirement or a popular theory. Had we recognized
that patience would be required to produce even the beginnings of systemic change, we could have
avoided unnecessary friction with both our philanthropic and our agency partners. In the same way that a
house is built from the bottom up, brick by brick, a slow and patient approach to developing BPI has built
unusually high levels of programmatic strength and support. Patience with the progress of the program has generated political dividends as well, creating champions and primary communicators among park managers and allowing Congressional managers to see and hear over time essentially the same story of funding shortfalls delivered by a broad array of parks and park advocates.

**Lesson #2: Understand Your Partner’s Perspective**

Co-management of the business plan program has provided many opportunities to misjudge perspectives, make false assumptions on timing, motive and priority and generally fail to appreciate organizational “background noise” that frequently affects and sometimes drives decision-making. In the first two years of the partnership, program managers in the Park Service and NPCA we took almost every opportunity to disagree on issues as varied as the selection of parks, qualifications for student participants and external communications of results. In the field, situations were more intense and complex, as student expectations of pace and progress frequently misaligned with the expectation of park managers, breeding frustration for all concerned. As a result, the success rate (i.e. the proportion of finished plans after the three month student engagement) in the first year of the program was 12 percent.

Over time, both Park Service and NPCA managers have worked to align perspectives and identify and manage expectations. In the field, park managers and student participants are trained together and students are encouraged to socialize with park staff to understand both personal and professional context. Since year three, program managers have conducted regular face-to-face meetings to discuss long and short-term objectives and approach as well as to discuss problems as they arise.

Perfect alignment of perspective between partners is difficult, even impossible to achieve, as organizations bring subtly or overtly different motives to the table. Dynamic tension may even be healthy, forcing partners to more closely examine assumptions. The faster the managers involved can recognize differences in perspective however, the more likely success will result. Although disagreements between NPCA and the Park Service remain common after six years of the BPI partnership, the business plan success rate in year six is 100 percent.

**Lesson #3: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate**

Even more basic has been the need to keep the lines of communications open at all levels. In the field, we have encouraged social as well as professional interaction among students and park staff as a means of lowering barriers to communication. In Washington however, regular, open communication has proven more important for the success of the program, as defined by its ability to avoid periodic catastrophes. Opportunities for conflict have arisen regularly. As mentioned above, programmatic perspectives have not always been well aligned, and even today some problems continue. With a change in the political management of the agency, the relationship between NPCA and the Park Service has changed as well. Working at the human level, enforcing regular communication has saved the program and the rescued the partnership several times and remains fundamental to success and forward progress even today. As an analogy, there is a compelling reason that drove the White House and the Kremlin to establish a crisis hot line -- communication. Stepped down to more mundane partnerships, the need for communications remains the same.

**Lesson #4: Leave your Ego Behind**

The bromide states that success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan. Organizationally, this is a particularly difficult and very common problem. NPCA has been a very proud partner in the success of the business plan program. Many staff have expended considerable effort raising the funds, developing the materials, recruiting the talent, co-managing the program and working around agency politics. As an organization, we must speak of our own success to generate the confidence necessary to secure funding for other programs. And so it is easy and convenient to speak of the Business Plan Initiative as NPCA’s success. But thinking this is a trap and has caused a variety of problems. In this, as in every partnership program, the success depends on the work of all of the partners and the effort of one is no more important than the effort of others. In fact, broadcasting the Business Plan Initiative as an NPCA success does active damage to the agency’s progress in embracing the program and developing its own sense of ownership that is necessary to keep the program alive, growing and incorporated as a part of the...
institution. It is a constant struggle to keep organizational egos in check, but it has been vital to the success of the program. Success does have many fathers, not one.

**Lesson #5: Respect is the Most Important Word**

Nearly every lesson above can be further boiled down to single word: respect. For all of the work of the partners involved in developing business plans, including but not limited to the students, the park managers, the agency managers and ourselves, success would have been unlikely without respect for the different skills and talents that each brought to the table. Respect is woven into every one of the lessons above.

Over the six-year span of the program, we have experienced our share of individual failures. Several parks never completed plans and several park managers have exited the program with a bitter taste. In every case, there was a breakdown in respect in some way. Students failed to respect the expertise of park managers or vice versa, NPCA or the agency managers failed to respect stresses or complications in the field. NPCA failed to honor the work of our agency partners at important times, causing unnecessary complications. There is no single recommendation more fundamental than the recommendation to respect the partners and the partnership.

**Conclusion**

The lessons learned through the Business Plan Initiative can and should be seen as broadly applicable to other partnerships with protected areas that have the hope of success. Patience, perspective, communications, and respect are all common hallmarks of getting along in business and even in social relationships. Most of the time, the problems that arise and sink good partnerships have more to do with human problems than technical ones. We learned most of these basic human management tools in kindergarten – but they are too often and too easily forgotten in business relationships and especially in business partnerships. As protected area managers and their partners struggle to ensure that those areas are well managed, adequately funded, fully appreciated and well exposed, these hallmarks of success stand as basic guideposts – more basic perhaps than any single proposal or new technique for generating revenue or communicating value. For without managing the partnership with the above in mind, it is dramatically less likely that the new idea or compelling theory will make its way into the world of reality and lasting improvement for the benefit of the protected area.