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Civic Strategies: E-Letter Explored Lessons, Limits of Pragmatism

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Otis is not a name often associated with greatness. Outside of Otis Redding, Otis Spunkmeyer, Otis elevators, and . . . and . . . perhaps Otis, the lovable town drunk on "The Andy Griffith Show," the known contributions to the growing good of the world by the Otises of history are scant. This is a problem in need of correction. To that end, meet Otis White of Civic Strategies, Inc.

For seven years Civic Strategies has been sending out an e-letter to persons interested in its subject: "what was going on in America's biggest metro areas." The approach has been pragmatic and technocratic: How do cities succeed? What are the five different types of mayor? Why did trucking deregulation work but not electricity deregulation? The letter's audience started small -- about 30 people -- and grew to more than 1,500 subscribers. It also led to regular commentary on NPR and in *Governing* magazine, and occasional pieces in major print forums such as *The New York Times*.

What began as one-paragraph thinking points -- a "self-education exercise," as White said yesterday -- sometimes developed into grand themes, such as *Seven Big Lessons for Local Governments*. (More on those below.)

Now the e-letter is coming to an end -- not because White has attained some kind of managerial enlightenment and will spend the rest of his days sitting under a tree answering questions from supplicants. Rather, he's embarked on another project: a systematic examination of decision-making by individuals, groups, and communities. Having spent a lot of time on what the good decisions were, he's turning his attention to the process question as to how they got made. Hours, like everything else, are finite. The e-letter was a labor of love, but "immensely time-consuming." If the new project turns out anything like the e-letter did, then anyone interested in good governance should pay attention. (In the meantime, treat yourself to Thomas Sowell's *Knowledge and Decisions*.)

ONE GREAT virtue of Civic Strategies' e-letter was its technocratic approach, which can have a tonic effect on those who sometimes drift too easily into airy realms of pure ideology -- the sort of folks who are likely to lament that while something might work just fine in practice, it doesn't work in theory. (Guilty, your honor.)

At the same time, if White's pragmatism has a downfall, it is precisely that technocratic

view. Government involves normative issues that can't be ignored because they're inconvenient. For example: City leaders might find protests and demonstrations incompatible with the image they want to market to tourists, but citizens have a right to assemble peaceably and speak their minds. Businessmen who run for public office often speak of running government like a business. But while everyone who works for Acme Widgets agrees on what Acme is all about -- selling widgets -- people don't agree on what government is all about. That's why we hold elections.

On the other hand -- yet again vast swaths of governance are not matters subject to litmus tests. There's no Republican or Democrat (or Libertarian or Socialist) way to build a bridge. There's a right way and a wrong way. You build it right, or it falls down.

Finally, one might note an interesting point about the e-letter itself: It did not arise from a grand strategic plan, but started almost as an afterthought, then grew organically and took on a life of its own -- a pleasant irony for an organization built around strategic planning.

SO WHAT HAS White found about how to make local government work? What are the seven big lessons? They are:

(1) Innovate, save money, throw the bums out, and use good sense. ("Change," he notes, "is particularly difficult for organizations that live by rules and procedures." What's more, "governments start out doing things that are logical enough," but "over time extend these efforts to the point of absurdity.")

(2) Protect the order of public spaces.

(3) Get dense: It's how you make residents and housing affordable.

(4) Save the property tax.

(5) Tie transportation to land use. (White says "we were snowed for so long by state highway departments, it never occurred to us that land use could be the goal and transportation the means -- and not the other way around.")

(6) Don't act helpless: Why local leadership is important. (How do you fix things? "Get the right people in the room, armed with the right information and aided by the right process.")

(7) Have fun: Cities are funny, funny places.

Anyone who's spent more than half a day in Richmond would certainly agree.

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