

It's About the Institution: Finding that Olympic Spirit in Facilities Management

By Joe Whitefield

By now, the 2012 Summer Olympics are a memory. Looking back, it is easy to recall so many wonderful accomplishments and memorable moments. Few events can match the Olympics for compelling storylines of great athletic achievement, personal triumph, and human interest—and London 2012 did not disappoint. There were countries racking up large numbers of medals and some countries winning their first ever. There were Olympic and world records and some non-medal performances that were every bit as awesome and inspiring.

For me, some of the great scenes in every Olympics are the medal ceremonies. In particular, the emotion displayed by the gold medal winning athletes as their national anthem is being played is gripping. I imagine many of them are trying to manage a cocktail of intense feelings of honor, satisfaction, and relief for their individual achievement combined with pride in representing their country on an international stage.

There are even those occasional athletes that are successful in their sport apart from the Olympics with questionable attitudes who demonstrate a transformation of personality when they are playing for their country instead of for the money. Indeed, there must be something powerful about playing for the name of the front of the jersey instead of the name on the back.

BRINGING OUT THE BEST

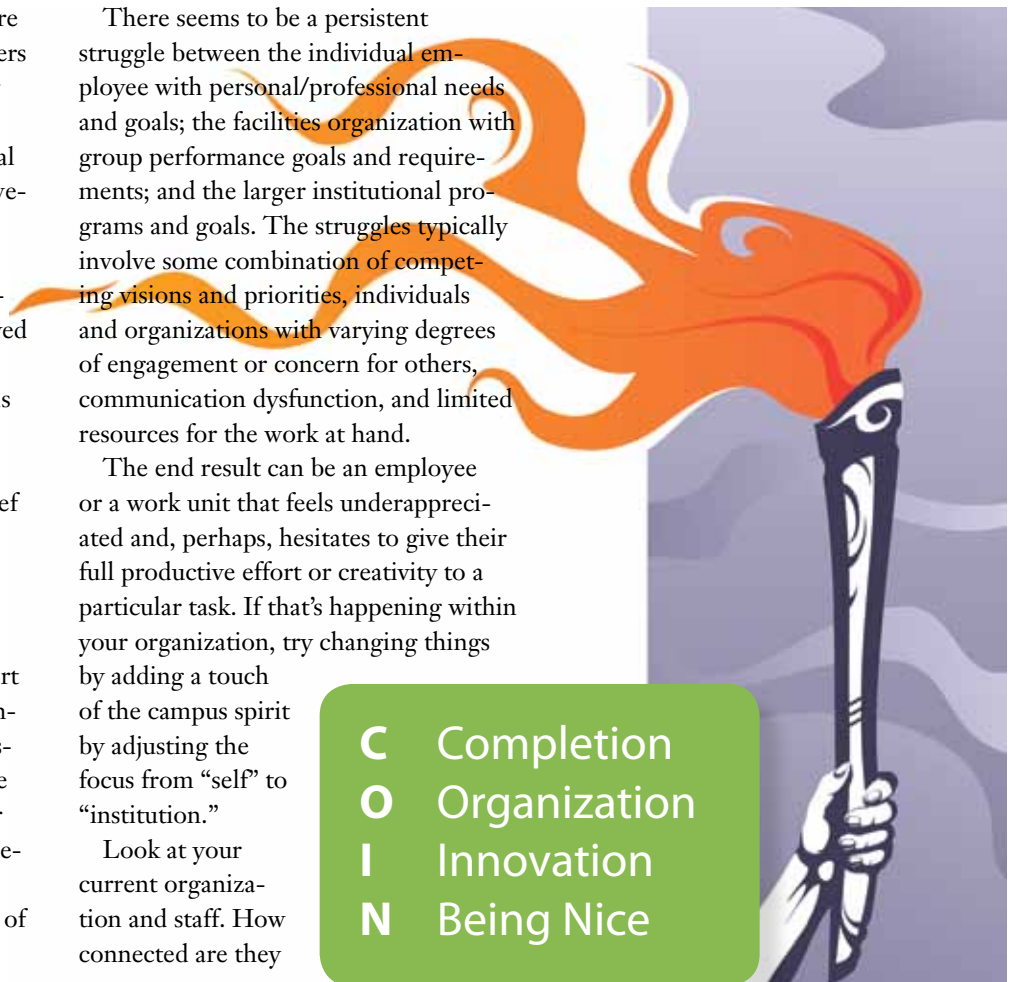
When it comes to individual performance in a team environment, facilities managers could probably learn from the Olympic experience. Bringing out the best in the people within our organizations is a continuous challenge for most of us.

There seems to be a persistent struggle between the individual employee with personal/professional needs and goals; the facilities organization with group performance goals and requirements; and the larger institutional programs and goals. The struggles typically involve some combination of competing visions and priorities, individuals and organizations with varying degrees of engagement or concern for others, communication dysfunction, and limited resources for the work at hand.

The end result can be an employee or a work unit that feels underappreciated and, perhaps, hesitates to give their full productive effort or creativity to a particular task. If that's happening within your organization, try changing things by adding a touch of the campus spirit by adjusting the focus from "self" to "institution."

Look at your current organization and staff. How connected are they

to the institution? How does the success of your efforts contribute to the overall success of the institutional endeavors they intend to support? It is easy to see the negative. When there is a breakdown of facilities services, everyone notices. It is harder, sometimes to see the positive.



C Completion
O Organization
I Innovation
N Being Nice

A UNIQUE STEWARDSHIP

Facilities management has always been a support enterprise. We design and construct buildings. Then we maintain and operate them to be safe, clean, and functional—for others to use. That demands a unique sort of stewardship. Facilities services should be about more than providing the facilities and utilities that make academic, research, and athletic endeavors merely possible; they should make them successful.

Today's facilities management organizations do much more than keep the wires hot and the water cold. Our services in the facilities and on the grounds contribute directly to fundamental institutional goals like recruitment, retention, and reputation. And more and more often, we are becoming an integral part of the learning environment of the campus, particularly in the areas of energy and the environment.

It is important that educational institutions and their staff be recognized for the value they bring to an institution. However, before others will see facilities as contributors to their success—and not as service providers, they must first see themselves as contributors to their success. It can be as simple as the attitude from the familiar story of the three brick layers. When asked what they were doing, one said “laying bricks,” another said “feeding my family,” and the last one said “building a cathedral.”

Like the cathedral builder, or an Olympic athlete, we must see ourselves as part of the bigger institution. We should define and communicate our work in those terms and give a worthy effort. And we should never forget to encourage our people continuously, and recognize success and improved performances when they occur.

Every four years I am left with the opinion that the magic of the Olympics

is not found in the physical skills of the athletes, but rather in their hearts. How else can you process the extreme training regimens that these athletes endure? As one track athlete said, she trained six days a week for four years for a 15-second race. Personal commitment and national pride are a powerful combination.

When talented individuals are motivated to push themselves to beyond ordinary limits, truly extraordinary performances are produced. As facilities managers, we should try connecting the people within our organization to the larger mission of the institution and see what types of performances emerge. Let the medal counting begin. ☺

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