

CASE STUDY 9: Brookhaven National Laboratory

Hal G. Rainey

I am involved in a study under a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), a federal agency that, among other duties, supervises the national scientific and weapons laboratories, such as Los Alamos, Scandia, Oak Ridge, and Brookhaven. As part of the team doing this study, I am responsible for Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL) on Long Island, New York. We are assessing the management of the laboratories, which is always handled by private sector contractors who have contracts from DOE to provide the management of the labs. The labs are called GOCOs, for “government-owned, contractor operated.” We have to assess whether this contracting-out of management is a good idea.

Brookhaven is a major scientific activity, on a five-thousand-acre compound. It has a distinguished history, with several Nobel laureates who have won their prizes on the basis of their work at BNL. There is a huge particle accelerator there, called the RHIC, that is the most important facility in the world for research by physicists on the nature of matter and of subatomic particles. There are also some major management and morale issues.

Now, switch to the Democratic National Convention of 2000, because something very relevant occurred there. Christy Brinkley, the supermodel, was a convention delegate from New York. She lives on Long Island, and has been part of a prominent outcry over nuclear radiation on Long Island. Interviewed on national television at the convention, she declared to the nation that her primary goal for becoming involved in politics is to shut down the nuclear reactors on Long Island.

What does this have to do with BNL? BNL used to have a nuclear reactor for research purposes, and it has already been shut down, due to protests and public criticisms from Ms. Brinkley, other celebrities who live on Long Island such as Alex Baldwin, national environmental protection activists, and citizens from the area. The scientists at BNL feel the reactor was safe. They feel that closing it was a sudden, unjustified response by DOE executives to the political heat from the public controversy.

In addition, several years ago, there was a small leak of tritium, a radioactive substance, discovered at BNL. The scientists feel that it was completely harmless, but when the news came out, the public—celebrities, activists, and citizens—reacted with a virtual hysteria. Many of the scientists at the lab were drawn into public meetings and controversies, trying to explain that conditions were safe at BNL. Their efforts were to no avail, and the controversy raged. Abruptly, the Secretary of Energy (the head of DOE) cancelled the contract for management of BNL that the former management group had held, and after some bidding brought in a new management group that currently manages BNL. Again, the scientists were concerned about the suddenness and lack of clear justification for this decision.

The new management group came in under pressure from DOE to do a lot to show the public that conditions at the lab are safe and will remain so. DOE also wanted the new management group to do a lot to increase attention to environmental protection and to health and safety at the lab. Examine the two attached organization charts. Look at the first major horizontal level below the director, where the associate and assistant directors are. Can you see changes from 1996 (Director Samios) to 1998 (Director Marburger) in the offices and positions, that reflect the pressures from the DOE (and the public) on the new management team? As part of these changes, the new management team put in a lot of rules and procedures about safety and environmental protection with which the scientists have to comply.

Many of the scientists feel very worried and upset about these changes and the turmoil that led to them. Some feel that they were already running a safe, secure, environmentally protective facility, and while they agree with the new rules, they consider a lot of them unnecessary red tape. Some also worry that many people at BNL feel insecure about its future, and good scientists are either leaving or refusing to accept employment there. Many BNL employees feel that they cannot really trust the leadership of DOE to make sound decisions about the lab, and that the future of the lab may be in jeopardy. A major challenge that the new management team has been trying to address involves reassuring the scientists and keeping the operations of the lab running smoothly.

Source: This case was written by Hal G. Rainey, Alumni Foundation Distinguished Professor, Department of Public Administration and Policy, University of Georgia

Discussion Questions

1. What changes do you identify on the two organization charts? Just from what you know from the preceding description, how would you interpret them—why did the new team make these changes, and what were they trying to do?

2. The leaders of BNL face the challenge of organizing the lab. There is already an organization, but they have to try to better organize it. Thinking about this example, consider what it means to be “organized” and “better organized.” Make a list of at least five important characteristics or dimensions of an organization that managers need to focus on, when trying to decide how well they are organized and how to get better organized.