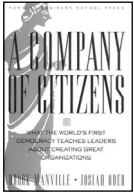




BUILDING A COMPANY OF CITIZENS

BY JANICE MOLLOY



A Company of Citizens

**by Brook Manville and
Josiah Ober**

In this age, when many voters are attracted to political candidates from the business world who vow to run government like a corporation, can business leaders learn anything from the public sector? In their book, *A Company of Citizens: What the World's First Democracy Teaches Leaders About Creating Great Organizations* (Harvard Business School, 2003), organizational expert Brook Manville and Princeton classics professor Josiah Ober respond to this question with a resounding “yes”—provided we look 2,400 years into the past to the roots of democracy in ancient Athens. By showing how Athens soared to greatness when other city-states failed, the authors distill a set of principles for linking individual initiative with collective action to achieve unprecedented success.

For nearly 200 years, the Athenians outmaneuvered, outwitted, and

outperformed their rivals in the Aegean Sea on the battlefield, in the marketplace, and in intellectual and artistic pursuits. While city-states such as Sparta favored centralized control, Athens rose to preeminence in the region through the development of democratic processes based on the participation of all citizens in governance (a class that admittedly excluded women and many others). By understanding their rights and responsibilities, Athenian citizens became highly motivated and deeply engaged. They didn't leave leadership to a special class of high-level managers or politicians—they knew that they *were* the organization and that their way of life would survive only through the concerted efforts of all.

Far from creating stifling levels of bureaucracy, the participative nature of Athenian governance led to a speed, agility, and commitment to action that top-down regimes couldn't match. As one of many examples of the power of self-governance, Manville and Ober cite the Athenians' defeat of Persia's vastly superior forces in 480 B.C. Through open deliberations, the citizen Assembly had agreed on a bold plan

for overcoming the Persian threat. The ships of the newly built Athenian navy—rowed by determined citizens rather than passive slaves—lured the enemy's boats into narrow straits near the island of Salamis. There, the locals' collective knowledge of wind conditions and geographical features gave them an advantage over the larger Persian force. The Athenians' subsequent defeat of the Persians represents a major turning point in the history of Western civilization.

Lessons for Today

Although the stakes may not be quite so high for our organizations, we can learn much from how the Athenians were able to capitalize on the collective talents of a diverse citizenry. Especially important for organizations in knowledge-intensive fields, building cultures and systems of participatory governance involves all employees in determining the organization's destiny. The results may be new surges of energy, creativity, and accountability in the workplace—and perhaps even beyond. ■

Janice Molloy is managing editor of *The Systems Thinker*.