

**THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF THE COMMAND AND  
ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF OF SPOKANE COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT #3**

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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**ABSTRACT**

Spokane County Fire District #3 is a department that transitioned from an all volunteer department to a combination paid/volunteer department. The paid personnel form the command and administrative staff. When the transition started twenty plus years ago, the paid personnel came from the volunteer ranks. That is not the case today. Fifty-percent of the personnel have come from outside the volunteer ranks. With the influence of "new blood" into the organization came a change in the culture of the department. To this point, there has been no formal measure of the organizational culture of the command and administrative staff.

The purpose of this research was to define the current organizational culture and climate among the command and administrative staff. Descriptive and evaluative research methodologies were used in answering the research questions through a literature review, a department telephone survey and an employee survey. The following questions were answered:

1. What are the dimensions or characteristics of an organizational culture?
2. How have other like-sized Fire Departments measured their organizational culture?
3. Currently, what are the organizational strengths and weakness that make up the culture of our Department's command and administrative staff?

4. What can we do differently based on the outcome of the organizational assessment?

The research revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the culture of the command and administrative staff. Seventeen elements were surveyed. Overall, the organizational culture of the sub-group was very strong. The stand out weaknesses were pay, benefits and feedback.

Recommendations were made to address all three areas of weakness and to continue to improve on the areas of strengths. Further recommendations were made to continue monitoring the culture of this group as well as expand the monitoring to the volunteer staff.

These recommendations were felt necessary to effectively and efficiently deal with the challenges of the upcoming millenium.

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## INTRODUCTION

Spokane County Fire District #3 is a department that has transitioned from an all volunteer department to a combination paid/volunteer department. The department currently has a command and administrative staff of six paid and three part-time positions. The line staff is comprised of 100 volunteer firefighters. With this transition has come a change in the values, views and beliefs of our department. These attitudes set the climate for the "Organizational Culture." The paid command and administrative staff set the path for the volunteer staff to follow. To this point, there has been no formal measure of the organizational culture of the command and administrative staff of Spokane County Fire District #3.

The purpose of this applied research project is to define the current organizational culture of the command and administrative staff to use as a baseline. Once defined, recommendations for positive changes, if needed, will be made.

Using descriptive research, the current organizational climate was analyzed. This was accomplished through an employee survey of the command and administrative staff. Further, evaluative research was employed to identify and recommend needed improvements to our culture. As a result of these research methodologies and a literature review, the following questions were answered:

1. What are the dimensions or characteristics of an organizational culture?
2. How have other like-sized Fire Departments measured their organizational culture?
3. Currently, what are the organizational strengths and weakness that make up the culture of our Department's command and administrative staff?
4. What can we do differently based on the outcome of the organizational assessment?

#### **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Spokane County Fire District #3 was formed in 1945 as an all volunteer department. In 1961, the first full-time employee was hired. The position filled was the Chief. This person came from the volunteer ranks.

Over the next 20 years, two additional positions were added. These positions were in the command and administration areas. Again, personnel from the volunteer ranks filled these positions. In 1981, the first person was hired from outside the volunteer ranks. Since 1981, it has been about an equal split of hiring from the outside or hiring from the volunteer ranks. The first Chief hired from outside of the Department occurred 1992. Currently, six full-time and three part-time positions comprise the command and administration of the department.

In the past 20 years, the department's calls for service

have increased ten-fold. This increased activity and the employment of people from outside the volunteer ranks, resulted in a change in the culture of the organization. If the culture is not recognized and addressed, the morale and attitude of the organization can be negatively impacted.

Part of the National Fire Academy's Executive Leadership course deals with "Assessing Organizational Culture." In this section it stresses that to be able to decipher the culture, you need to be able to define the shared assumptions, shared feelings, shared doings, shared things and the shared sayings. These all are items that the employees bring with them.

Spokane County Fire District #3 is a well-respected fire department in Washington State, many other departments have followed our lead. In order to keep a leading posture, we need to make sure we use our resources to the fullest. Our most valued resource is our employees or our internal customers. Many organizations have failed as a result of failing to recognize their internal customers or employees.

Problems exist in all organizations, but a problem is only a problem when it is not addressed, otherwise it is an opportunity for improvement. Spokane County Fire District #3 is committed not to fail. By assessing and addressing our organizational culture, we will be utilizing another opportunity for improvement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature was reviewed starting with the course material of the Executive Leadership course at the National Fire Academy. The search was expanded to the Learning Resource Center at the U.S. Fire Administration's National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland, Eastern Washington University's Kennedy Library in Cheney, Washington and the International Association of Fire Chiefs. Textbooks, periodicals, research papers, publications and trade journals were scanned on this subject. When sufficient material was located, the material was reviewed and utilized as support for writing this research paper.

Initial interest for this research topic was generated while attending the Executive Leadership course at the National Fire Academy. "Assessing Organizational Culture" in unit seven of the Executive Leadership Course Student Manual (NFA, 1996) was especially thought provoking to this author. In this unit, it was stated there are two principal types of assumptions that form the organizational or corporate culture. These are the values and the beliefs that individuals of the organization exhibit. Noted, these are not necessarily the stated values and beliefs, but rather these are the practiced or demonstrated values and beliefs. The assumptions, beliefs, ethics, experiences and values that each individual brings to the organization along with the individual's history with the organization form the cultural makeup of the organization. History of the organization is a

very powerful influence of the culture. Tradition, artifacts, stories and legends are all historical components.

The culture of an organization is developed over time. Changes to the culture occur from time to time depending on internal and/or external influences. These changes normally are slow to occur and may not initially be noticed. Cultures (people) resist change because they perceive that they are fighting for their survival. (Cook, August 1990) Human nature is normally resistant to change. Organizations, by virtue of being made up of humans/people, follow the same trend. Organizational cultures are resistant to major changes, especially on the short term. Some changes may take generations of individuals in an organization to be totally accepted. (NFA, 1996)

Each culture has it's own strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing the strengths and then utilizing them will help foster change and lead to strengthening of cultural weaknesses. (Kotter and Heskett, 1992) Kotter and Heskett (1992) found three common reoccurring unhealthy cultures through research in the United States. Managers tend to be arrogant, managers tended not to value customers (internal/external) and the customers became hostile toward the leaders. Ultimately, openness and mutual respect become self-perpetuating, as employees and supervisors work together to achieve a positive culture. (Eastman and Walz, 1993) The culture tends not to change when a new leader takes

charge. The changes that occur will be a result of the leader's ability to be a "Social Architect." (NFA, 1996)

Social architecture is the use of several "things" by the leader, which help to form the culture of the organization. These include Calendar behavior, Reports, Physical setting, Public statement, Positive reinforcement, Frequency/consistency of behavior, Role modeling and Location of groups. (NFA, 1996)

The fire chief is the custodian of the department's culture; the chief has the responsibility to teach and practice the customs that make the culture strong. (Cook, August 1990) The key to being successful for the fire chief is to control the culture by leadership intervention. This is done by knowing a balance of when it is time to create a culture change and when it is time to maintain the prevailing culture. The fire chief must envision the effect the change will have on the department's culture and decide if the change is worth the impact to the culture. (Ramano, July 1990)

The challenge for fire departments nationwide is to adapt to a new vision of public management from its internal and external customers. The internal customers are the employees of the organization and the external customers are the public. To adapt means to change. (ICHIEFS 1993) Many fire departments are still operating using the same methods and policies that they did a quarter of a century ago. As we go into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leading will be about leading organizational transition.

(Bruegman, 1997)

Understanding the culture of the department being forced to change is paramount if the change will be successful. Fire Chiefs are asked to do more for less and to be more accountable to the taxpayers and their governing electorate. Dealing with the culture of a fire department needs to be addressed. Addressing the culture will ensure the welfare of those who must work as a team and wish to perpetuate the fire service culture as a helping caring and professional service to those in need.

(Monroe, August 1997)

To deliver service using alternate methods is a change of the work environment. These methods will require organizational culture to change in order for the fire departments to be effective in a changing environment. (Turnstall, 1997)

There is a strong correlation between the culture of the organization and the climate within the organization and it's ability to change and adapt. Without determining the culture and the climate of the organization, effective change is difficult.

(Parker, August 1997)

Numerous citations were noted that in essence said the success of a Fire Service Executive would be contingent on their ability to recognize, understand and shape the culture of the organization they are to lead.

The reviewed findings of others in literature established and identified the significant elements for consideration in this

research. Because of this literature, a basis was recognized to pursue this research project.

### **PROCEDURES**

A literature review was conducted. When sufficient literature was located, the research methodology was selected.

For this report, descriptive and evaluative research was selected. A two-question telephone survey was conducted of 25 liked-sized randomly selected fire departments in the northwestern part of the United States. This survey was used to determine if a common instrument had been used in other like-sized departments to assess the organizational culture of their departments. (see Appendix A). Because of the survey, a common survey was determined to have been used in a vast majority of the departments that had surveyed their department. A noted limitation was that of the 25 departments contacted, only eight had assessed their department.

After reviewing the findings of the telephone survey, it was decided to use the Campbell Organizational Survey™ (COS™). This survey, as well as being the survey of choice of the departments contacted, is part of the curriculum of the Executive Leadership course at the National Fire Academy. This survey, as well as the tabulated results, is copyrighted and is not allowed to be reproduced without permission of the author. This was considered to be a limitation. Appendix B of this paper lists the address

to contact for access to this survey. This is a marketed survey. There is an associated cost for the survey and tabulation of the results.

The survey was given to eight of the nine people that comprise the command and administrative staff. The person excluded was the Chief of the Department. The Chief being the custodian of the Department's culture supervises these respondents. All eight surveys were sent in for scoring and the results were returned.

From the results returned, recommendations were made for improvement of the organizational culture of the command and administrative staff of Spokane County Fire District #3.

## **RESULTS**

The results to this research project were a collection of data from two surveys and a literature review. Comprehensive review and evaluation of material gathered allowed for answers to the four research questions listed in the "Introduction" section of this paper.

### **Answers to Research Questions**

Research Question 1. The literature review revealed the dimensions or characteristics of an organizational culture. The dimensions include the assumptions, beliefs, ethics, experiences and values that each individual brings to the organization along with the individual's history with the organization from the

cultural make up of the organization. This compounded with the traditions, artifacts, stories and legends of the organization's past as well as the leadership of organization, form the organizational culture.

Research Question 2. The telephone survey answered this question. Of the 25 like-sized departments contacted, only eight had assessed their department. Of the eight that had assessed their department, seven had used the Campbell Organizational Survey™ and one had developed an "in-house" survey.

Research Question 3. As a result of the telephone survey, and the fact that the Campbell survey was used at the National Fire Academy, this survey was the instrument of choice to evaluate the climate of the organizational culture of the command and administrative staff. The survey made sixty-seven statements and the respondents had six options that they could select from as to their agreement/disagreement with the statement. The six options were; strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, agree or strongly disagree. After the surveys were completed, they were sent in and results were returned. The results reflected how the group felt on 17 specific elements and an "Overall Index" of the climate compiled from an average of all of the elements. The elements were:

1. Work Itself
2. Working Conditions
3. Stress-Free

4. Co-Workers
5. Diversity
6. Supervision
7. Top Leadership
8. Pay
9. Benefits
10. Job Security
11. Promotions
12. Feedback
13. Planning
14. Ethics
15. Quality
16. Innovation
17. General Contentment
18. Overall Index

The results were graphed on a scale that placed each in one of five ranges. The ranges were; very low, low, mid-range, high or very high. "Highs" are strengths of a culture while "lows" are weaknesses. Mid-Range is described as a typical employee. Being this category is considered average, it was given a ten-point range while all others were all five-point ranges. Of the 17 elements, none were listed as very low nor were any listed as very high. Eight elements were listed mid-range, with only one of them falling below the median line. The elements mid range were:

1. Co-Workers
2. Supervision
3. Top Leadership
4. Promotions
5. Feedback
6. Quality
7. Innovation
8. General Commitment

Feedback fell below the median line of the mid-range category.

Six elements were listed as high. They were:

1. Work Itself
2. Stress-Free
3. Diversity
4. Job Security
5. Planning
6. Ethics

Three elements were listed as low. They were:

1. Working Conditions
2. Pay
3. Benefits

The "Overall Index" listed this group of employees on the low side of the high range.

Research Question 4. The answers to this question will be found in the "Recommendations" section of this research paper.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the research paralleled that of many others that were reviewed. Like research projects indicated the establishment of a baseline. This was common in research by Harlow (July 1994) and Parker (August 1997).

The Campbell Organization Survey™ supported the Executive Leadership student manual that there are different beliefs among a group of individuals. (NFA, 1996) The survey further amplified findings of Monroe (August 1997) that the culture of a department needs to be addressed for the welfare of those who must work as a team and who wish to perpetuate the fire service culture. Elements negatively influencing the climate of the organization is a weakness in the culture.

It was not surprising in the returns of the respondents in the telephone survey that only eight had assessed the culture of their departments. Unfortunately, small departments (less than 10 full-time employees) tend to be more isolated and not as progressive as their larger counterparts, especially in sparsely populated regions. An unexpected finding was that the seven who had selected the Campbell survey had either been exposed to it at the National Fire Academy or they learned of it through someone who had been at the Academy. It seems finally that after 20 plus years of existence, smaller departments are involving themselves in Academy at an increasing rate.

The COS™ results indicated that Spokane County Fire District

#3 has some weakness among the culture of the command and administrative staff. The one that I really questioned was the "Working Conditions." The Department has nice facilities, decent equipment and certainly is not technologically deficient. Follow-up questioning of all the respondents gave credence to the survey result. Seven of the eight respondents are part of the incident response force. They considered the working conditions at incidents scenes in their survey responses. Obviously, we cannot always control the conditions at incident scenes. This I believe justifies the low rating on the survey.

Pay and benefits are areas that need to be addressed. Having good employees that feel they are underpaid and do not have benefits equal to comparable departments can have a very negative impact on the organizational climate. Average satisfaction on these two elements would have raised the "Overall Index" of this group to the "High/Very High" rating opposed to just bordering on the "High/Mid-Range" rating.

The other element of concern to me where there was a below average return was "Feedback." In small departments where there is frequent contact with some employees and infrequent contact with others, it is very easy to forget to whom information has been dispersed. Timely, accurate and constructive feedback on performance as well as being kept informed about happenings in and around the department is extremely important for a well functioning team.

A department with a "High" organizational climate is a department to be proud of, however, there are still opportunities for improvement. While the "Lows" are certainly the highest initial concern, the opportunity for improvement exists in all the elements. The CEO of Ford Motor Company best described this a few years ago after receiving the Malcom Balbridge National Quality Award. He said, "I know what it takes to earn the points to receive the award, my concern lies with what it takes to earn the points we did not receive."

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this research was to determine the current organizational culture of the command and administrative staff of Spokane County Fire District #3. The study revealed the cultural climate through the results of the Campbell Organizational Survey™. I will provide the results of this survey and this research paper to the Chief of Spokane County Fire District #3 for his reference to use for changes in the future.

It would be my recommendation to use this survey as a baseline to start a bench marking process. I would further suggest that subsequent surveys be done on a three-year basis to monitor the impact of changes.

It also would be prudent to survey volunteer staff to ensure there is parity among the other faction that makes up the department. When all the paid staff came from the volunteer

staff, this was not as big an issue as it may be today due to the influence of "outside blood" into the culture.

The specific elements of pay and benefits should be addressed. A salary survey needs to be conducted by all stakeholders in the organization to determine if the perception by the command and administrative staff is accurate. Pending the outcome of the survey, adjustments should be made if needed. If the survey would find that these perceptions are not accurate, buy-in needs to be obtained from the command and administrative staff on this point.

Feedback is another area where improvements need to be made. All players need to be kept apprised of the happenings in the department. This needs to be done on a timely and consistent basis. Performance based feedback also need to dispersed on a regular basis. With this feedback should come the expectations of quality of performance.

Once these previously discussed issues have been addressed, I would recommend that a plan be implemented to improve on the other 14 elements referenced in the survey. All the elements of the culture need to be considered when any suggested change is proposed.

Addressing elements that form the organizational culture and the climate in the organization will be a positive step towards being able to face the challenges of the new millenium.

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**Appendix A**  
**Telephone Survey Questions**

1. Have you ever assessed your department's organizational culture?                    **YES**                    **NO**

2. If yes, what instrument did you use and where did you obtain it?

**Appendix B**

The Campbell Organizational Survey™ is available from:

**National Computer Systems Inc.**

P.O. Box 1416

Minneapolis, Minnesota 55440

Telephone 612-886-9827