

EVALUATING THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF THE
UNION TOWNSHIP FIRE DEPARTMENT - CLERMONT COUNTY, OHIO

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

It has been recognized in many companies and organizations, this one included, that they have not used all of their assets to their fullest potential. Yet they do not set out or put forth the effort to identify where they are in relation to where they could be.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the organizational culture of the Union Township Fire Department. This was done to identify its current climate as well as understand needs, priorities, weaknesses, strengths and at least lay the foundations to which further research could be done at a later date to measure change and make recommendations for change as necessary.

An evaluative research procedure was used to analyze the current organizational climate. This was done through surveys of employees of the department. In conjunction with the survey, a literature review was conducted. Following the survey, a baseline of the organization would be developed that would give a snapshot in time reflective of where the organization was at that time. From that baseline, and with information from the literature review, plans could be developed for future organizational change and development.

Research issues to be addressed included the following:

1. What was the organizational culture of Union Township Fire Department?

2. What were the major strengths and weaknesses of the organization?

3. Establish a baseline from which future measurements can be evaluated against.

4. What are the recommendations for change, if needed?

Surveys were given to all employees within the organization.

This included administration, management and line personnel. These surveys evaluated the organization in four separate subsystems which included technical, goals and values, structural and psychosocial/managerial subsystems.

A literature review for information was conducted through local libraries as well as the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy.

The results of the survey indicated that the organization was average in the four subsystems. Through the literature review in conjunction with the surveys it indicated a weakness in getting the most out of our most valuable resource - our personnel.

Recommendations were made to continue with some of the existing programs but expand them. Tabulation of the survey results form a baseline for which future research could be

compared to hopefully chart progress. Priorities of target areas within the organization in order of importance included psychosocial/managerial, followed by structural, goals/values and finally technical. Addressing in order of priority shall enhance overall team building and development. Emphasis of teamwork in

problem solving and rewarding those who work hard to reach organizational goals.

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INTRODUCTION

The fire service has historically been viewed as a group of strong bodied personnel that rushed to emergencies with swinging axes, cutting holes in roofs and running into burning buildings. Their customers were the public they served to protect from the ravages of fire. They have long been concerned with their public image by their customers because it was only through their support that the fire department existed. Like many other businesses, little to no effort or emphasis was placed on the internal customers, namely the employees of the department, to evaluate the internal climate of the organization which is important especially in the rapidly changing times of today's fire service.

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the organizational culture of the Union Township Fire Department. This was done to identify its current climate as to understand needs, feelings, opinions, priorities, weaknesses, strengths and at least establish a foundation to which further research could be done at a later date to measure change. Furthermore, to make recommendations for positive change if necessary.

An evaluative research procedure was used to analyze the current organizational climate. This was done through surveys

of the employees of the department. A literature review was also conducted. Following the survey, a baseline of the department was established and using information obtained from the literature review plans could be developed for organizational change and development.

Research issues to be addressed included the following:

1. What was the organizational culture of Union Township Fire Department?
2. What were the major strengths and weaknesses of the organization?
3. Establish a baseline from which future measurements can be evaluated against.
4. What are the recommendations for change, if needed?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Union Township, Clermont County has had a rapidly changing Fire and EMS service delivery system to go along with the rapidly changing growth of the community. From 1942 to September of 1990 life safety services were provided by two privately owned and operated fire departments that contracted with the township to provide Fire and EMS delivery. This was accomplished through traditionally predominately volunteer

organizations.

This community began to see very rapid growth which translated into a drastic increase in demand for service. Unable to keep pace with volunteers, paid full-time personnel were gradually added which helped meet the demands but was a major hit on the budgets. As the financial constraints were getting much tighter, the regular replacement of equipment and vehicles was unable to occur as larger and larger portions of the the budget went towards employee costs.

In September of 1990, the township made a decision to take over the Fire Department. The two private organizations disbanded and one public agency was started. The growth and demands continued while this newly formed department was making responses out of vehicles that were in some cases 25-30 years old. In 1993 an additional operating levy was put before the voters for additional personnel and the much needed replacement of aging equipment and vehicles. This levy failed.

In 1995 a similar levy was placed on the ballot and passed which allowed for major upgrades in tools, equipment, vehicles and the addition of personnel. The department went from older, out dated technology to state-of-the-art tools of the trade.

As a result of all the rapid significant changes in a relative short time frame the question was "what is the

organizational culture currently of this fire department?" Looking specifically at the key organizational subsystem of Kast & Rosenswieg Systems Model, the subsystems that make up an organization (technical, goals & values, structural and psychosocial/managerial) where did the organization stand? (USFA 1996, pg 2-5)

Change is easier said than done. Whenever we try to change an environment, work place, routine or the services we provide, this inevitably creates a lack of stability within the organization. Since any organization is its people it creates anxiety and a lack of stability to the people as well.

In the fire service specifically, the status quo, a sense of permanence and tradition, has been the backbone of the culture and a constant for many organizations.

According to Bruegman (Fire Chief, April 1997, pg 86) if we don't position ourselves to be competitive in the future, the forces of change will come externally, from outside our organizations and the fire service, and not internally where we can better influence the outcome.

The veil has been lifted from the public sector and the demands and expectations of the people we serve on a day-to-day basis are much higher than they've ever been. As we manage organizational change, it is crucial that we understand our organizations' cultures and how they affect the change process.

When cultures and strategies clash over change initiated inside the organization, invariably the culture will win out.

If the organization's culture does not embrace the change initiated, the overall change efforts will struggle and fail.

The other side of the coin is when the change is externally motivated which places organizations and their people in the most vulnerable position. If the change is externally motivated, whether it is political, economical or service driven and the organizational culture doesn't embrace it, the organization is in a position where it may not actually survive.

We've seen this countless times whether it be an effort to privatize a public-sector department to save money or a consolidation occurs. When the organization's culture doesn't embrace the change, the change effort doesn't fail, the organization and its culture does.

The time immediately preceding the 1990 public agency department is a very realistic case in point. The culture of the two private organizations was such that when approached by the public-sector officials who they contracted with and who controlled the public funds asked for more accountability, their lack of cooperation was the beginning of the end of the private not-for profit fire departments in the township.

More recent was the passage of the operating levy in

1995. The general public demands for explanation and understanding of the need for additional monies/taxes. A failure to adequately educate the public was a definite contributing factor to a failed levy two years earlier. Rest assured if the promises made during the campaign to pass the levy such as updating tools, equipment, vehicles and expanded services, additional personnel, better response times and improvement in the overall safety for the community do not occur the organization will suffer in the future.

This research project ties directly into not only the previous Executive Fire Officer Program course of Executive Leadership but the previous three courses, Advanced Leadership Issues in Emergency Medical Services, Strategic Management of Change and Executive Development. The Executive Leadership course included modules in The Management Process, Developing Self as a Leader, Managing Multiple Roles, Developing Influence Skills, Fostering Creativity and Innovation, Assessing Organizational Culture, Being in Transition and Managing Change. (USFA Executive Leadership, 1996)

The Advanced Leadership in Emergency Medical Services Course included modules in Leadership, Quality Management, Customer Service, Human Resources, Public Information, Education and Relations, as well as Current Issues and Networking/Political Influence.

Strategic Management of Change included using the change

management model by first analyzing the existing organizational culture and assessing what if any changes need to be made. Secondly, take the information gained in the analysis to formulate a plan designed to bring about any desired changes. Thirdly, to implement the procedures and strategies detailed during the planning stage and assure that they are executed and behaviors most likely to insure a successful implementation performed. And lastly, once the changes are implemented to continuously systematically monitor it to assure it is working as anticipated. This is accomplished through continuous evaluation and hopefully institutionalism. (USFA, Strategic Management of Change, 1996)

Executive Development included modules on Working as a Team, Problem Solving, Following and Leading, Marketing in the Public Sector, Organizational Change and Development, Outside Perspectives: Elected Official and City Manager, and Service Quality.

All of these references were used in analyzing the current organizational culture of the department, identifying the organizational subsystems, using the change model to make and evaluate recommendations and strategies for the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review began with a search of material available through the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy. In addition, it consisted of available resources used in local fire department libraries as well as publications made available through the International Association of Fire Chiefs (ICHIEFS).

Local government in America is on the verge of monumental change. Administrators, elected officials and agency managers from communities both large and small have seen the future defined with a vision so complex that it has its own vocabulary. Words like empowerment, re-invention and re-engineering are more than buzz words, they foretell a future of public management that is more innovative, competitive and customer oriented than anything we have known in the past.

This movement is already having unprecedented implications on the fire service. Critics are paying more attention to their fire departments and in many cases are exploring completely new management ideas. (ICHIEFS 1993, pg 1)

The ability to foster an organizational climate that manages change productivity is more important now than any other time in the history of the public sector. The ability for an organization to do this is directly related to its

culture. Many, many references to change, change management, organizational change were found in the literature review.

Many of us are still playing by the same set of rules we used twenty years ago according to Bruegman. (Fire Chief, July 1997) As we go into the 21st century, leading will be about leading organizational transition, about empowerment and leading people outside of their paradigms. It will be about change.

As we navigate organizational change, it is crucial that we understand the organization's cultures and how they effect the change process. Whether a change is initiated from inside or outside an organization, culture plays a part in how it's processed, accepted and ultimately dealt with (Bruegman, Fire Chief July 1997, pg 86-87).

The problem of a changing work environment is causing fire departments to use alternate methods to meet the expectations of its' customers. These methods will require the organizational culture to change in order for fire departments to be effective in a changing environment. (Turnstall, March 1997)

Today's executive fire officers are finding themselves immersed in a cultural revolution. Norms and traditions are being tested as new management styles and attitudes in the fire service are being implemented. Young people entering the fire service want more than a career with a pecking order

dependent upon time and tenure. The culture of the fire department, as in society, is changing fast. Fire Chiefs are asked to do more for less and to be more accountable to taxpayers and city fathers. Dealing with 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 as a helping, caring and professional service to those in need. (Monroe, August 1997)

Additional literature referenced the growing number of changes being forced on the fire service by the changing world around us. The ability to change must become a more natural and a fundamentally easier task to perform. This research effort was to find if an element exists within the basic organization which would be identified as being able to ease these change processes. The research was centered around one of the very basic elements of an organization, the culture, to determine if the culture could have such an impact on the organization's ability to change. (Parker, USFA Feb 1997)

Parker further indicated, as did many others in this literature review, that there was a strong correlation between the culture and the climate within the organization and the organization's ability to change. From these results, it was highly recommended that fire service organizations develop very strong understandings of their organizational cultures

and climates. The ability to align change efforts with the change positive climate and cultural elements that exist will ease the adoption of change.

Numerous articles, papers and reports emphasized the importance of today's fire service to break from stereotypes and traditions and change to survive, let alone be successful. Not only to change but cultivate a climate or culture that welcome change not only today but in the future as well. These findings and observations of the work of others seriously emphasized the importance to this organization to evaluate its current status. The timing here was probably more important due to the fact that it was a rapidly growing community, rapidly growing fire department, and with the recent passage of the operating levy much needed to play catch up but also to prepare for service delivery needs of tomorrow. Many of the questions and concerns raised by other researchers were directly related to the organizational culture they were dealing with. So the logical first step for this organization was to try to establish a baseline.

PROCEDURES

The procedures that were used in compiling this report consisted of a literature review and survey. The literature review was conducted at the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy, Emmitsburg, MD as well as reference materials used in the fire department library, along with materials made available through the library of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

The literature review was limited to current (1993 to present) topics related to organizational change and culture.

As a result of the literature review and the noted importance of understanding the existing internal culture, a survey was developed to attempt to establish and define the current organizational culture of Union Township Fire Department.

Using the key organizational subsystems as outlined in the Kast and Rosensweig System Model (USFA March, 1996) as a starting point, questions were formulated in each of the five subsystems that make up an organization. Namely these were Technical (first 4 questions), Goals and Values (next 3 questions), Structural (following 4 questions), Psychosocial and Managerial (remaining questions). This survey requested the respondents to evaluate the current organization. Thirty seven questions were listed related to the five subsystems and they were rated from 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = slightly

disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = moderately agree, and 5 = strongly agree. (Appendix A)

There were fifty surveys initially sent out. Thirty one were returned. All current employees were polled which included part-time, full-time, line officers, middle and upper management.

The survey results were tabulated according to the four separate subsystems they were designed to evaluate. The psychosocial and managerial subsystems were combined due to the fact that the nature of the questions made it too difficult to separate the categories.

Due to time constraints of this project, it was limited to this survey. Additional surveys could be conducted by job classifications or to see if the results differ as to where the respondents are on an organizational chart, level of responsibility, shift, station etc..

RESULTS

The results of this research project came from the comprehensive evaluation of all data collected. The survey in conjunction with the literature review evaluated the research questions which asked; What was the organizational culture of Union Township Fire Department?, what are the strengths and

weaknesses of the organization?, and what are the recommendations for change, if needed?

Looking strictly at the survey results from the 31 questionnaires returned, the results tabulated as follows:

Technical - 3.6	Goals and Values - 3.5
Structural - 3.5	Psychosocial/Managerial - 2.8

Although the actual results are not statistically significant, when compared with the findings in the literature review, the results seem more important.

In addressing the first research question, in consideration for all of the changes that have occurred and are continuing to happen the organizational culture is such that it is accepted it adequately, therefore, an average score overall of a 3.23 . Looking at it closer, it would reveal that possibly, the organization has done a better job with the technical 3.6 and goals/values 3.5 subsystem than on the people side of the organization, structural 3.0 and psychosocial/managerial 2.8. (Appendix B)

It is important to define the subsystem according to the model (USFA March, 1996). Technical subsystems included; knowledge, techniques, rules, equipment and facilities. Goals and Values subsystems included; overall goals, unit goals and individual goals. Structural subsystems included; tasks, units, work flow, authority, communication and information flow, rules and procedures. Psychosocial/ Managerial

subsystems included; planning, controlling, philosophy and leadership style, human resources, attitudes, perceptions, motivation, interactions, group dynamics and organizational climate.

With these results and the identified strengths and weaknesses, a baseline had been established. Again due to the time constraints, changes could not be made in time to re-evaluate for this project but definite recommendations could be made. These should then be measured with a similar survey in the hopes to chart progress.

Appendix A is a sample survey form of what was used.

Appendix B is a tabulation of the average results in each subsystem.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research paralleled that of many others that were reviewed. Similar projects indicated the establishment of a baseline from which future measurements can be made (Harlow, July 1994). This in both this project and Harlows has to be an important initial step. Although most organizations feel that they have at least a basic, general idea of how things are, it is a major mistake to assume you know where you are without posing the questions and asking.

Other researchers like (Turnstall, USFA March 1997) not only addressed the internal issue of What was the current organizational structure?, but also What are some trends in the work environment that have impacted the culture of organizations? Again as noted in this project, change in the fire service is happening at a faster pace than in its history. All indications are that this will continue at probably even a faster speed. This necessitates change friendly organizations. The culture of the fire department, as in society, is changing fast. Employees want more say in the matters that directly affect their lives and jobs. Norms and traditions are being tested as new management styles and attitudes in the fire service are being implemented. Dealing with 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. (Monroe, USFA August 1997)

The other area of importance that was emphasized in both this research and that of others dealt with the area where we can impact the organization the most but scored the lowest in, that being in the area dealing with personnel. Judging from the multitude of information in the findings of others, at least in part, directly relates to education and communications. (Reed, USFA January 1997) Noted as a first recommendation, in regards to reducing the resistance to

change by employees, was to establish effective communications. Many of the other literature reviewed referenced openness of communication, team building and shared values and goals.

The results of the research indicate that from a technical or structural stand point we have done better than with the psychosocial and managerial aspects. Reviewing the later two would clearly indicate they pertain more to the human resource side of the culture where the first two deal more with technical, mechanical, buildings or tools and physical environment of the culture. This probably could have been predicted due to the fact that prior to the passage of the most recent levy the tools of the trade, ie; equipment and vehicles, suffered greatly and fell way behind in replacement.

Immediately following the levy a major move occurred that totally upgraded equipment and vehicles to state of the art. It is at that point that the initial survey was done.

The implications to this particular organization is that a snapshot of the organizational culture as it pertains to these subsystems has been taken. This can serve as a baseline to measure against in future studies. An emphasis needs to be placed on those areas pertaining to managerial and psychosocial. In part this should not only catch the other areas but should exceed and maintain a high priority. My interpretation as a result of this project indicates an

average acceptance to the current status of the organization.

Average is not good enough in this current society of "do more for less" and continuous competition for resources and service delivery. It would appear that concentration in the areas of planning, controlling, philosophy and leadership style, human resources, attitudes, perceptions, motivation, interactions, group dynamics and organizational climate have the potential to make an average organization excel.

(Hesselbein, 1996) relates that as important as it is for leaders to articulate their vision and values, what they say must be consistent with the aspirations of their constituents.

Constituents also have needs and interests with dreams and beliefs of their own. If leaders advocate values that are not that of the collective will, they will not be able to mobilize people to act as one. Leaders must be able to build a community of shared values. Their studies showed that shared values;

- foster strong feelings of personal effectiveness
- promote high levels of loyalty to the organization
- facilitate consensus about key organizational goals and the organization's stakeholders
- encourage ethical behavior
- promote strong norms about working hard and caring
- reduce levels of job stress and tension
- foster pride in the organization

- facilitate understanding about job expectations
- foster team work and esprit de corps.

People tend to drift when they are unsure or confused about how they ought to be operating. The energy that goes into coping with, and at times repeatedly debating, incompatible values takes its toll on both personal effectiveness and organizational productivity. Consensus about short and long term values creates commitment to where the organization is going and how it's going to get there. (Hesselbein, 1996) It is this shared vision and commitment that moves an average organization to the status of a leader in its profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations logically flowed from the results of this research project. The first two involve the important areas of communication and education. They are aimed at strengthening the weaknesses and improving the strong points within the culture of the organization. Steps were implemented to enhance the avenues of communication both up and down throughout the organization. This included the use of payroll notes. Informal information covering points of interest, status of projects, personal accomplishments etc...

are compiled into a handout and attached to the employees paychecks.

An additional step was to invite the fire fighters' union president to attend round table discussions with all the officers and management of the department once a month in an attempt to bridge any perceived gap between labor and management. This was also done with hopes to speed communication throughout the organization.

Focus teams that were created approximately one year ago were decided to let continue and in some instances expand their roles. This shall allow for more input in decision making, additional buy in and shared ownership with many aspects of the department.

A new full time position of Training Coordinator was created and is in the process of being filled. Routine daily training and education is essential to not only inform the personnel of changes in operations as well as technology, but communicating the reasons, benefits and necessity of these changes.

Last, but not least, an organization is its people. This entire project was undertaken in an attempt to solicit the input of our most important resource, our personnel, as to the current culture and status of this organization. In this time of rapid transition both internally and in society as a whole it is important to keep a finger on the organizational

culture. This should be done by continually monitoring for change. Repeated evaluations and surveys would be necessary to measure progress and channel efforts in the right direction.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Form

April 16, 1998

Please fill out this survey and return it to Chief Deimling's mailbox prior to April 30th. Your input is appreciated in defining the current organizational culture of the fire department. Thank you!

Please use the following scale:

- 1-Strongly disagree
- 2-Slightly disagree
- 3-Agree
- 4-Moderately agree
- 5-Strongly agree

I have the basic knowledge to satisfactorily do my job

I have the appropriate tools and equipment necessary to do my job

I have available to me the necessary guidelines/rules/regulations to do my job

The facilities that I work out of are conducive for me to do my job

I have clear and precise personal goals pertaining to my career

My work group/shift/station has clear and precise goals pertaining to job performance

I understand the overall goals, mission and vision of this fire department

I understand the specific duties/tasks expected of my position

I have the necessary authority to perform the responsibilities of my position

The organizational matrix (chart) of the department is clearly understood

The communications and information flow, both up and down within the organization is effective and timely

Good performance is recognized

Appreciation is expressed when people perform well

My supervisor pays close attention to what others say

Supervision communicates a clear sense of priorities

Others listen for feelings as well as ideas

Supervisor: can be relied on

Follows through on commitments

Keeps promises

Acts in ways consistent with their words

Can be trusted

Respects people's differences

Shows they care about others

Shows concern for the feelings of others

Treats others with respect, regardless of position

Makes others feel a real part of the organization

Creates opportunities for people to succeed

Designs situations that permit people to achieve their goals

Involves others in new ideas and projects

Helps others learn from mistakes

Values action over maintaining the status quo

My peers support my work efforts

Peers support each other to succeed as a team

I like to come to work

I am rewarded adequately for my efforts

I am motivated to perform at an acceptable level

My peers are adequately trained to do the job

Thank you for your time and effort to complete this survey

APPENDIX B

Survey Results

SURVEY RESULTS

SUBSYSTEM	AVERAGE SCORE
Technical Subsystem	
Goals & Values Subsystem	3.5
Structural Subsystem	
Psychosocial & Managerial Subsystem	

Index

Strongly Disagree
1

Strongly Agree
5