

Organizational Culture Analysis of
Vermont Town Central Administration
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Author Note

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Introduction

This Organizational Culture Analysis (OCA) of a Vermont Town Central Administration (TCA) was conducted as a research project for the Organizational Theory and Behavior Class in the Masters in Public Administration program at the University of Vermont (UVM) in February 2014. The enthusiastic cooperation of the Town Administration staff and Selectboard made a robust analysis possible, and their assistance is greatly appreciated.

For the purposes of this study, organizational culture is defined as the *shared values and enduring patterns of a group with a shared history* (Lawson, Anderson, & Rudiger, 2013). This includes group learning that is built up over time in order to solve problems for the purpose of survival. Survival of an organization here means adaptation to the external environment and solving the problems of internal integration (Schein, 1990).

The Vermont Town in this study was chartered in 1762. The Town currently has an estimated population of about 4,400 people and spans 25,250 acres. A recent study by UVM students estimates that about 210 businesses operate in the Town. Currently, a local developer is proposing to build a 245-unit residential development near the Town center. The company has a contract to purchase an 84-acre property when the permitting process is complete. The proposed development would likely happen in phases and be completed over a 10-year period. The project must still pass through three steps of Development Review Board scrutiny. Given the population of the Town, if the project is approved, it will constitute major growth for the Town.

For the purposes of this study, the TCA is defined as the 12 key staff members that work in the Town Hall and as heads of Police and Fire and 5 Selectboard members who have full-time jobs elsewhere.

Data for this study was gathered from the Town's Annual Report, conversations with the Town Administrator, the Town Organizational Chart, demographic data of staff and Selectboard members, and 8 in-person interviews – 6 staff and 2 Selectboard members – using a standard set of questions. (See Appendix for demographic data, compiled interview responses, and organizational chart.)

Organizational Description

For most of its history, the TCA has been a very small, flat organization. Over the last 15 years, the number of staff has grown, and within the last 5 years a more hierarchical structure with defined job descriptions has emerged. The current organizational chart shows the Selectboard above the Town Administrator, with department heads next and the remainder of staff below (see Appendix).

The TCA is currently comprised of only slightly more men than women. However, there is only one woman currently serving on the 5-person Selectboard. All of the TCA except the Town Administrator are over 40 years old, with the Town Administrator being the youngest at 33 years old. The average age of staff is 53. The average age of Selectboard members is 55. The average tenure for staff is 11 years. The average tenure for the Selectboard is 9 years. This data implies that there is deep institutional memory at the TCA, which could be lost as older staff and Selectboard members retire or move on. The salary range for full-time roles is fairly tight at \$41,000 – \$73,000. The median annual income in the TCA is \$62,000. (See demographic data in Appendix.)

In interviews, the Town Administrator is pointed to as the individual with the most influence in the organization. However, he is also the staff member with the shortest tenure in the

TCA and he is still somewhat reliant on the institutional memory of long-term staff. The Selectboard and the Town Administrator are currently working on refining the Town Administrator job description. This change is meant to solidify the Selectboard as having a visionary function and the Town Administrator as having a managerial function regarding staff and operations. Until now, the two functions have been somewhat intertwined. The new Town Administrator and the tweaks to that role are a significant change for the organization. However, interviews with staff and Selectboard members indicate that these changes are necessary and should have a stabilizing effect as the TCA prepares for a possible new development project that could cause a strain on existing resources.

It is clear from interviews and spending time at the Town Hall, that the TCA interfaces with everyone in the Town and that the Town Hall is a very open and welcoming environment. When questioned about communications networks, the reoccurring themes that emerged in the interviews were: *Town Clerk, Planning Commission, Development Review Board, and the Front Porch Forum*. The Town Administrator noted that compared to other Vermont Towns, this Town has an extremely high amount of activity and engagement on Front Porch Forum.

It is also worth noting that TCA staff and Selectboard members, most with long tenures, are in the unique positions of representing the Town in all facets of their lives, so their own social circles serve to extend the TCA's networks. The Town also lists 15 active committees on their website, comprised of volunteers and TCA members. In interviews, several individuals pointed out the need to nurture and sustain a high level of volunteer networks in order to maintain the quality of life in the Town.

Organizational Culture Analysis

The physical Town Hall building is a handsome, white, 100-year-old, 3-story structure in the center of Town. Improvements to the Town Clerk's office and the flooring in the main hall have served to provide a welcoming environment for the public. However, the other areas of the Town Hall have some drawbacks for staff. Themes that emerged in the interviews were: *we make due, Town Clerk area nice, need to rearrange some workspaces, have the tools needed.* There appears to be agreement that other than the Town Clerk's office, the workspaces are not ideal and for various reasons, including privacy for citizens interfacing with the Planning Office, they need some re-thinking. There were also some comments about the need for some interior decorating. There does not appear to be an initiative in the works to remedy the issues because it could incur a cost, which everyone agrees is not a priority.

As the sentiment about the physical arrangements at Town Hall suggests, it is clear from interviews that customer service combined with keeping costs as low as possible is a strong, internalized value at the TCA. When asked directly what is most valued at the TCA, staff and Selectboard members were in strong agreement that *providing information, caring about each person, customer service, not wasting tax-payer money, and providing value*, are the organization's core values. Several staff commented on how important it is to listen to people and help them navigate processes, with sensitivity to different levels of income and education.

When asked to describe the organizational culture at the TCA, there was wide agreement that people liked each other and felt like a family. The most common responses were: *longevity of staff, like family, deep historical knowledge, customer service-oriented.* Although there was agreement that just like any close knit work environment, issues arise, there was also agreement

that they were all able to manage difficulties well and ***“still walk out the door laughing together.”*** All interviewees felt their opinion was valued at the TCA, and the majority felt that group discussions were valued over individual initiative.

In my observations, the TCA staff and Selectboard appear to be highly competent, professional, and easy going and it is evident that a culture of cooperation and collegiality permeates the organization. In addition, all those interviewed displayed a strong Public Service Motivation (PSM), which appears to include a fairly high level of self-sacrifice for the public good. According to Wright et al. 2013, when public sector organizations experience change, theory suggests that Public Service Motivation (PSM) may play a part in employee acceptance of change. It is thought that employee support for change depends on factors that may have attracted them to public service in the first place, valuing the needs of others, especially in the broader community. However, their survey of 449 local government employees losing 30 full-time positions found that only one of the four PSM dimensions measured – self-sacrifice – was significantly related to affective commitment to change (Wright, Christensen, & Isett, 2013).

This observation may indicate that the TCA organizational culture is open to change even if that change takes a toll on individual staff and Selectboard members. One consequence of this feature of the organizational culture is a possible norm of stretching beyond one’s capacity in a role or multiple roles without complaint.

When questioned about the strengths of the organization, the TCA’s ***small size and caring staff*** emerged as themes in interviews. Ironically, when questioned about the challenges of the organization, the small size of the TCA was also mentioned, including: ***director of building & facilities over-worked – situation unsustainable, succession because longevity***

means major loss of institutional knowledge when staff leaves, Town about to go through big growth spurt – how to accommodate, and Town Planning office not able to keep up with demand - may need more help.

The area where there was the least agreement was the question about the TCA's goals. Most interviewees referred to either cultural norms such as providing good service or to the goals of their own department (not included in the data). In conversations with the Town Administrator, it was mentioned that a mission statement was in the works. It is possible that the present staff have been working under assumed goals based on their own longevity and well-developed organizational culture.

References

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- Schein, E.H. (1990). Organizational Culture, *American Psychologist*, Volume 45, No. 2, 109-119
- Wright, B.E., Christensen, R.K., & Isett, K.R., (2013). Motivated to Adapt? The Role of Public Service Motivation as Employees Face Organizational Change, *Public Administration Review*, Volume 73, Iss. 5, 738-747

Appendix

Demographic data of Town Central Administration

| Work Units | Roles | Age | \$ Salary | Gender | Years in Position |
|---|--|------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Town Administration | Town Administrator | 33 | 73K | M | 2 |
| | Assistant to Town Administrator & Project Coordinator* | 44 | 41K | F | 6 |
| Buildings & Facilities | Director of Buildings & Facilities | 63 | 65K | M | 16 |
| Town Clerk & Treasurer, plus Delinquent Tax Collector | Town Clerk, Delinquent Tax Collector | 56 | 62K | F | 12 |
| | Assistant Town Clerk | 65 | 45K | F | 15 |
| Lister's Office | Lister | | 8k | F | 23 |
| | Assistant Lister** | | 12k | F | |
| Planning/Zoning | Director of Planning & Zoning | 42 | 63K | M | 12 |
| | Zoning Administrator | 73 | 49K | M | 12 |
| Fire | Fire Chief | | | M | |
| Police | Police Chief | 64 | 66K | M | 2 |
| Recreation | Recreation Coordinator** | 41 | 32K | F | 10 |
| Selectboard | Board Member | 55 | 1500 | M | 4 |
| | Board Member | 41 | 1500 | M | 2 |
| | Board Member | 62 | 1500 | F | 22 |
| | Chair of Selectboard | 65 | 2250 | M | 16 |
| | Board Member | 56 | 1500 | M | 2 |

*Newly-created full time position

**Newly-created half-time position

General Responses to Interview Questions (bold indicates repeated theme)

1. *How would you describe the culture at the town office?*

supportive, collegial, congenial, caring, open-minded, good team spirit, respectful, **longevity of staff**, roles worked out – comfortable, **like family**, very capable and motivated staff, professional yet informal, **deep historical knowledge**, healthy, productive, everyone chips in, have fun, **customer service oriented**, people like stopping in, building active place, helpful, friendly, hard-working, nice mix of people, collaborative, cooperative, joking, encourage citizens to participate, strive for transparency, strive for efficiency, strive to provide value for taxpayer, work to solve problems, have normal workplace issues that get worked out, may be slow to innovate

2. *What is most valued at the town office?*

assisting residents, listening, **providing information**, **caring about each person**, **customer service**, **not wasting tax-payer money**, **providing value**, efficiency, problem solving, cooperation with other Towns, wide range of services, compassion, not being overly obsessed with procedure, making ourselves available, being helpful, making collaborative decisions, strong work ethic, honesty, respect, camaraderie

3. *Who in the central administration has the most influence on your job?*

Town Administrator, Selectboard, public at large

4. *What groups (internally & externally) do you communicate with the most?*

parents, sports organizations, **Planning Commission, Development Review Board**, Town Planner, Police & Fire, Town Administrator, water systems operators, **Town Clerk**, public at large, **Front Porch Forum**, local papers, volunteers

5. *How do you like your workspace? Do you have all the right tools to do your job?*

old building, heating issues, smells, **we make due**, **Town Clerk office nice**, rest of space needs work, **need to rearrange some workspaces**, needs some interior decorating, **good tools**, truck is workspace, need better spot for maintenance equipment, some computer issues, short on space, working at full capacity, would like window, **open on 3rd floor but need privacy at times with public**, 1st and 2nd floors OK

6. *Which is more important at the town office: individual initiative or group discussions?*

group discussions, individual initiative, Town Clerk is individual initiative and Town Planning is group discussions, not enough discussions, need more support for group discussions

7. *Is your opinion valued at the town office?*

yes, overall good communication, often have to give news people don't want to hear, people seek my council, staff and board listen and are responsive

8. *What are the goals of the town office?*

caring about residents, **servicing community, good service**, being responsive to residents, **finding efficiencies**, wasting less, improving policies, progressive thinking, being respectful, keeping public well-informed, honoring volunteers, Selectboard selects goals for each year, **having the most civic engagement**, making best use of tax dollars

9. *What are the strengths?*

dedicated and intelligent staff, high level of competence, hard-working staff, **small size**, open office environment, institutional knowledge, **caring staff**, always trying to improve, public involvement, serve tax-payers well, inclusive atmosphere, public comfortable coming in, helping people with paperwork, sensitive to socio-economic situations, helpful, collaborative, assist even when right person not available

10. *What are the challenges?*

growing, **high tax rate that people might not understand**, demonstrating value, **director of building & facilities over-worked – situation unsustainable, succession because longevity means major loss of institutional knowledge when staff leaves, Town about to go through big growth spurt – how to accommodate**, small size, balance of public/private life, **Town Planning office not able to keep up with demand - may need more help**, Town Administrator new and may need more information, need to understand Town Administrator role more, maintaining character of Town, ensuring we are on right path with growth, may not be planning well financially for growth, how to maintain customer service as growth happens

11. What else can you tell me about the culture at the town office?

May need more employees, need to define role of Selectboard, need to encourage more volunteerism, challenge to separate professional opinions from public's desires, nice place – welcoming, people comfortable asking questions, lucky no big internal clashes, **like family**, pride in work, everyone strives to do a good job, if several people leave at once could lose cultural definition, all personalities here work well together, cooperative, respectful, good working environment for policy-making, people listen to each other, most communication is face-to-face, **don't always agree but able to walk out the door laughing together**, like the people I work with, fun environment

Town of Organizational Chart

