

Organizational Culture Intervention for
Vermont Town Central Administration
Ann K. Janda
University of Vermont
March 2014

Author Note

Ann K. Janda, PA 302 Organizational Theory and Behavior Class, University of Vermont.
Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Ann Janda via email.
Contact: ajanda@uvm.edu

Re-cap of Organizational Culture Analysis

The Organizational Culture Analysis (OCA) of a Vermont Town Central Administration (TCA), conducted in February 2014, described and analyzed the culture of the TCA, defined as the 12 key staff members, the heads of Police and Fire, and 5 Selectboard members. In the last 15 years, the TCA staff has grown, and within the last 5 years a more hierarchical structure has emerged. The TCA is currently comprised of slightly more men than women, with only one woman on the 5-person Selectboard. The average age of staff is 53, with the Town Administrator being the youngest at 33. The average age of Selectboard members is 55. The average tenure is 11 years for staff and 9 years for the Selectboard, implying deep institutional memory. (See demographic data in Appendix.)

The Town Administrator is pointed to as the individual with the most influence in the organization, but with the shortest tenure he is still somewhat reliant on the institutional memory of long-term staff. A revised Town Administrator job description is meant to solidify the Selectboard as having a visionary function and the Town Administrator as having a managerial function regarding staff and operations. The new Town Administrator and the tweaks to that role are a significant change for the organization.

The TCA's networks include the whole community and with great frequency the Town Clerk, Planning Commission, Development Review Board, and the Front Porch Forum. TCA staff and Selectboard members, most with long tenures, have social circles that extend the TCA's networks. The Town also lists 15 active committees on their website, comprised of volunteers and TCA members.

There is wide agreement that TCA staff and Selectboard members like each other and feel like a family. 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. 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 challenges of the organization, the small size of the TCA was 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). However, a mission statement is in the works.

Strengths and Vulnerabilities of the Organization

A visitor to the Town Hall cannot help but notice that the TCA exudes a friendly, customer-service attitude, which can be rare in public service organizations that all too easily slip into a heavy focus on process and procedure. The relatively small size of the TCA and its long history

of being a flat organization have enabled it to be open to citizen participation (Yang & Pandey, 2011) and sensitive to individual circumstances.

However, as the organization evolves into a more hierarchical structure, which is necessary to create process and procedural efficiencies as the town grows; the challenge for the TCA will be to maintain the same high level of openness and flexibility regarding citizen participation and sensitivity to the needs of individuals. Recent research (Yang & Pandey, 2011) indicates that a transformational leadership style may counteract the negative effects of hierarchical authority by motivating behavior toward flexibility and openness to change. Therefore, one recommendation for the TCA is to incorporate this idea: *motivating organizational behavior toward openness and flexibility to citizen participation and concern for individual citizens* into the new Town Administrator job description in order to lock in what is already a strength in the culture of the TCA. Formalizing this aspect of the culture into all job descriptions in relevant ways may also prove valuable as long-time staff and Selectboard members retire or move on.

Once one spends some time with members of the TCA, it is also clear that a strong Public Service Motivation (Wright, Christensen, & Isett, 2013) as well as a very high level of competence, professionalism, and hard-working attitude is a major strength of the culture. However, the danger of too much self-sacrifice on the part of staff to get the job done, which some staff point out is unsustainable, should be further acknowledged and addressed. Given that the Town already has a high tax rate, currently it may be difficult to increase the number of staff, but a strong case should be made so the public is at least aware of the situation. Temporary measures such as the recruitment of volunteers, temporary contract labor, or interns to lighten the load should also be considered where practical.

Additionally, given that the average age of staff is 53, a strategy for maintaining institutional memory over the next 5-10 years as staff retire or move on needs to be developed. Although this type of long-term thinking can be difficult to keep a high priority, a strong case for the continuance of the highly competent culture of the TCA should be made to the public. Perhaps a small temporary volunteer committee of relevant professionals could focus on developing a succession strategy for the TCA.

Given that the Town is on the verge of a major growth spurt, one of the major challenges for the organization may be in preparing adequately to accommodate that growth. Here is the full list of concerns reported in interviews: *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.* Therefore, strategic planning for growth should take a high priority over the next year. That planning should incorporate additional personnel as well as internal systems and structures to manage increased workloads if and when the growth occurs.

And finally, a clear definition of the TCA's mission and goals needs to be developed, agreed on, and formalized so that staff and department goals can be aligned with organizational goals. Studies show that formal goals, which are specific and challenging, yield higher levels of performance than vague, non-quantitative goals (Lawson, Anderson, & Rudiger, 2013). And

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE INTERVENTION: VERMONT TOWN CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

more recent studies have found that goal-focused leaders are particularly effective in working with highly conscientious employees (Lawson, Anderson, & Rudiger, 2013) such as the TCA's current staff.

In developing a mission statement, the visioning should ideally begin at the Selectboard level so that all initiatives taken up by the Town also fall in line with big picture community desires. When developing a mission or vision the concepts should be lofty yet clear such as building a healthy community, improving the lives of citizens, or maintaining a vibrant, safe community. Then tactics such as increasing civic engagement to achieve those ends can be listed as goals, which are then translated into department and employee goals.

References

- Yang, K. & Pandey, S.K. (2011). Further Dissecting the Black Box of Citizen Participation: When Does Citizen Involvement Lead to Good Outcomes, *Public Administration Review*, November/December 2011, 880-892
- 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
- Lawson, R.B., Anderson E.D., & Rudiger, L.P. (2013). *Psychology and Systems at Work*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc, Chapter 8, Organizational Culture.

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
Select Board	Board Member	55	1500	M	4
	Board Member	41	1500	M	2
	Board Member	62	1500	F	22
	Chair of Select Board	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

