

Working with politicians and city staffers during an organizational change process

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ABSTRACT

City governments regularly operate through a combination of elected officials and professional staff. In this case, an external change agent has been hired by a city to help improve its operations. The city has developed a reputation of infighting, tumultuous council meetings, and even physical confrontations. The change agent's initial attempts to solicit useful information by email (asynchronous communication) were unsuccessful. Face-to-face interviews (synchronous communication) were significantly more successful. The face-to-face approach helped the change agent develop a certain level of trust with the city's staff. The change agent immediately noted that the city staffers and elected officials were approaching their roles in dramatically different ways. In part, the approaches were outlined by state statutes concerning municipalities. However, the staff saw the elected official's behavior in a starkly negative light. Professional staffers saw their own approach to serving the city focused on process improvements and problem resolutions. In comparison, they saw the elected officials as favoring problem identification and assigning blame. They also felt elected officials were decidedly negative when discussing the city. Through a series of staff led face-to-face meetings, the change agent was able to assist the city in establishing a much needed improvement in organizational sentiment and a more open and positive environment for reviewing problematic areas of the city's operations.

Keywords: public administration, asynchronous, synchronous communication, trust

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational change can be challenging for an institution. Entrenchment, vested interests, fiefdoms, uncertainty, and loss of control are just a few of the issues inhibiting meaningful and lasting change. In this case, an external change agent is attempting to assist a city government's efforts to improve their operations. The change agent will serve as the protagonist. The situation and main characters will be revealed through his interactions with the city's elected officials and professional staff. The change agent's goal is to transform this group of individuals into a cohesive team that can operate in an effective manner.

River City is governed by a mayor, council, and city manager form of government. This form concentrates power with the elected officials who hire a professional manager to oversee and deliver public services. Many cities and other governmental structures operate with a combination of relatively long term professional staff and quasi/temporary elected or appointed officials. The roles of these parties are normally outlined by state statutes. In this case, the council serves as the community's decision makers. The council hires a professional manager to handle the administrative responsibilities.

As an organizational development practitioner, Dr. Kevin Anderson's task is to go into client organizations, analyze situations, ascertain problems and make persuasive arguments toward solutions (Wasserman, Kram 2009). Dr. Anderson is a certified counselor with over twenty years of experience working with both small and large clients. He specializes in building trust and gaining cooperation between opposing points of view. His ability to establish rapport will be crucial for this case. His status as an external change agent presents both advantages and challenges. He benefits as someone without a vested interest in any change path. He is also someone that will not suffer if a poor choice is made.

THE SCENARIO

The case deals with a city government's efforts to find its way to a better future amidst a tumultuous environment riddled with disagreement, infighting, and even physical confrontations. The city has seen a decline in population in favor of nearby municipalities and a decline in sales tax revenues. Loud and boisterous arguments are common in both private and public venues. The situation boiled over during a council meeting when a fist fight occurred between two members of the city council. One councilman was arrested as the perpetrator and taken to jail. The local newspaper characterized the incident as more than an isolated occurrence.

Dr. Anderson has accepted the assignment to bring the opposing parties to more conciliatory positions. While having a general understanding of the city's hostile environment, he is completely amazed by the high level of dysfunction. At one point, our change agent feels physically threatened by one of the principle players. Welcome to River City.

CHANGE AGENT'S APPROACH

Dr. Anderson's approach to this scenario will begin with collecting information to be followed by a plan to move the organization forward. He needs to develop a certain level of rapport and trust with the main players in the case. Communication will be a key part of the process. His initial emails and texts to the city's staff and elected officials yield virtually no

useable information. He receives only a few brief replies. How can someone gain trust and rapport in an age that is dominated by asynchronous electronic communication?

Organizational communication continues to shift toward virtual and asynchronous interactions (Errichiello & Demarco, 2020). Asynchronous communication is the process of sending and receiving messages with a time lag. Not all virtual communication is asynchronous; however, it is often distributed in a manner that offers asynchronous consumption. This lag between sending, receiving, and possible replying can be useful. With asynchronous communication, the receiver can delay consuming the message until a time of their choosing. In contrast, synchronous or real time communication normally requires a receiver's immediate attention. This may involve context switching and can inhibit attempts to focus their attention to a single issue.

While it can be very useful to send and receive information with a time lag, the nature of the interaction is often different. Virtual interactions may limit off-subject topics which can be common with face-to-face conversations. A reduction in off-subject interaction sounds beneficial; yet, it may come at an unintended price. Numerous studies have reported virtual and or asynchronous communication as a poor choice for establishing trust (De Pillis & Furumo, 2007; De Pillis, Furumo, Ray, Furumo & Higa, 2015; Hyang, Gattiker & Schwarz, 2008)

The negative impact of time lagged communication on trust may be related to the reduced richness of asynchronous communication. A face-to-face interaction encompasses the cacophony of nonverbal communication elements that are generally processed at an almost subconscious level. This may be especially important while individuals are developing first impressions or making initial judgements of the other person's motives. (Furumo, De Pillis, & Buxton, 2012).

Empathy differences have been shown to exist between face-to-face and virtual environments (Carrier, Spradlin, Bruce, & Rosen, 2015). Cognitive empathy or deciphering the emotional state of someone else was lower. Virtual team members could relate to stated emotions; but, they were not that good at detecting them from virtual interactions.

The adage that that the end justifies the means continues to be embraced in the world of politics and influence. All of which supports the importance of trust and rapport in organizational communication. Dr. Anderson needs a plan for establishing trust. Her approach will hinge on the age-old technique of looking someone in the eye, asking questions, and listening.

Dr. Anderson decided to shift her situational assessment to individual interviews of twenty-four city officials that have significant responsibilities within the city government. It is important to remember that people are complicated. Few are entirely evil or for that matter entirely good. Most are trying to perform their job as they see it.

River City has seen a fairly regular turnover of elected officials. Most of the current River City Council are in their first term. Most of the current River City Council are probably in their last term.

Initially, Dr. Anderson was seen as an inspector or outsider whose mission was to point fingers and place blame rather than find solutions. It soon became obvious that building a relationship of trust must be the starting point for all interviews. He solicited their support as a challenge to do the right thing. He asked each employee to put their own emotions aside and discuss frankly what they saw as the real problems. This step alone opened many doors into the inner workings of River City's municipal government. Dr. Anderson felt that the city employees were appreciative that someone had asked for their opinions. Several of the city employees commented that no one had asked their opinion in years.

Dr. Anderson felt the elected officials approached their roles with emotion and immediacy. The staff on the other hand seemed to think in more resolute and objective terms. The staff tended to seek solutions to issues. What was the quickest and simplest way to fix a problem? Their approach tended to focus on improving the city's operations versus being quoted in the news.

THE PLAYERS

Twenty-four individuals were interviewed and each had a role in influencing Dr. Anderson's analysis of the overall situation of River City's government. This included all the city's elected officials and all the city's department heads. The individuals referenced below were thought to be the key players.

River City Mayor – Randy Mills
Police Chief – Paul Carson
Finance Director – Frank Denning
Fire Chief – Felix Collins
City Clerk – Cindy Clark
Human Resource Director – Helen Reardon
City Manager – Clay Meeters

The Mayor

The River City form of government was that of the mayor, council, and city manager model with the city manager being in charge of day to day operations. This arrangement has a strong history of functionality and is relatively free from political interference. It works best when the city council and mayor work together and provide the city manager with a clear consensus of direction. Abrasive personalities are often a detriment to the forming of a cooperative atmosphere. River City's mayor was Randy Mills. The mayor's approach to the interview with Dr. Anderson included numerous power plays and intimidation attempts. Randy Mills believed that his political opponents were out to get him and the city's problems were as simple as that. Dr. Anderson was struck by the aggressiveness of the mayor. It was hard to imagine the mayor being open to any compromise or efforts to negotiate settlements. For the mayor's supporters, and he had many, this was a strength as they were convinced of the mayor's vision. Using his most persuasive manner, Dr. Anderson was able to establish a working relationship, albeit a somewhat strained one, with the city's top political figure.

Police Chief

After the interview with the mayor, Dr. Anderson found her discussion with police chief Carson to be quite refreshing and could perhaps be the key to understanding the situation. In the eyes of Chief Carson, the mayor's propensity to antagonize his fellow council members, his abrasive personality, and his dictatorial leadership style were at the heart of the city's problems. The police chief also felt the image of poor race relations in River City was mainly about politics. The police chief welcomed opportunities to improve race relations and had pursued several programs to that end. However, improving race relations did not seem to be as important

to elected officials as their efforts to highlight race related problems.

Finance Director

Frank Denning, River City's finance director, felt the city council lacked financial responsibility and accountability. The council often ignored city procedures concerning expenditures, i.e. hiring Dr. Anderson as a consultant. Mr. Denning saw the contract as possibly illegal and he was intent on seeing it investigated. Even with this accusation, Dr. Anderson saw the finance director as a sincere and capable public servant who found himself caught up, through no fault of his own, in the morass of infighting among the city council members. Out of all of this, by using a positive approach and open mindedness, Dr. Anderson was able to develop a relationship with the finance director that proved invaluable as he pursued the goal of finding a way to initiate and encourage cooperation. Later, Mr. Denning was instrumental in fostering the city's efforts to move forward in a positive direction.

Fire Chief

Fire chief Felix Collins had tried to remain above the city council turmoil. He desperately wanted to focus on the task of operating the fire department and stay removed from the ongoing calamity at city hall. This seemed to be unlikely as River City had fire and safety responsibilities outside of the city limits and it often required a city council resolution to extend their services to those locations. Chief Collins had to regularly appear before the full council for what could have been handled by a routine request to the city manager. The fire chief quickly learned that there was no such thing as a routine interaction with the city council. Discussions rarely stayed on subject and almost always veered off to political maneuvering. Chief Collins seemed to spend more time anticipating and responding to the unexpected and contingent wanderings of these exchanges than addressing genuine and important fire department requests. He confided to Dr. Anderson that he was contemplating early retirement.

City Clerk

Cindy Clark was River City's city clerk. Given the responsibilities of the city clerk's job, the person holding this position often accumulates considerable influence and power. Cindy had been in this position for 18 years and had worked under several administrations. She had an easy going personality. She focused on taking care of business. She tended to be highly flexible. She did not seek publicity. While not thought of as a strong leader, her type B personality had allowed her to tolerate what she saw as gross ineptness from city hall. She considered the current administration the worst during her time with the city.

Human Resource Director

Helen Reardon, human resource director, was another longtime employee of the city. Much like the city clerk, she had worked with several administrations over the years. She knew her job and handled personnel decisions with professionalism. Due to longevity and the power of her position, she wielded considerable influence. She had conducted the hiring interviews for many, if not all of River City's current employees. Her nature was to look for the positive in all

situations. She did feel the city's current situation was not sustainable. She felt the political arm of the city was not fulfilling its duty to the city.

City Manager

Clay Meeters, the city manager of the past 3 years, had somewhat of a different view of the situation. He did not share the dire assessment of his staff at city hall. Dr. Anderson thought perhaps it was because of Mr. Meeter's previous work experience with another city in the state that was widely viewed as corrupt and ineffective. Mr. Meeters had survived and thrived in some tumultuous environments. He felt River City would move through this political storm. Dr. Anderson wondered if the city manager's intention to retire in about nine months was enabling him to suffer through the current situation. Soon enough, Mr. Meeters would tenure his resignation and it would become someone else's problem. Whatever the reason, Dr. Anderson accepted the city manager's view and took it into consideration with the same weight as all the others.

SOLUTION

With this situation being more complex than Dr. Anderson envisioned, he was convinced that a positive and transparent approach that focused on building cohesion and cooperation was the right path to take. It was with that mindset that he saw the opportunities for River City to build its way to a positive future. His next step after the interviews was arranging several face-to-face work sessions with different groups of the main players. These sessions were soon expanded to most of the staff and the elected officials. Discussions would start with a relaxed update on the current state of affairs in the city. This would be followed by mild debate as to how to move the city forward while bringing everybody into the fold of a positive goal orientation. Criticizing or dismissing any suggestion was to be avoided. From the start, the participants seemed to embrace the setting as an opportunity to improve their work environment. A hopeful optimism permeated the sessions as feelings and perceptions were shared.

These small group sessions were followed by a larger meeting that included all the main players and other city employees that wished to attend. The police chief spoke first. He felt somewhat remiss in his lack of encouragement of open communication with his officers and the community. He wanted ideas on how to improve this situation. The group had some excellent suggestions.

Frank Denning, head of the finance department, spoke next. He voiced his pleasure at the positive spirit that was growing in city hall. It was like 'a breath of fresh air' and he could see how progress could be made through these sessions if they could maintain the positive focus. Chief Collins, fire department chief, interjected that the main thing that was missing was a relationship based on trust. He felt that trust had always been a part of River City's government in the past. He missed those days when he felt they all had each other's back. He was hopeful that they could return to that level of trust.

From these opening comments, a wave of participation flooded the room. Most everyone in attendance added to the discussion to some extent. This session was followed by similar sessions and smaller group sessions to focus on specific issues. These sessions operated independently of any formal agenda. Other city employees continued to attend. Ideas were introduced and conversations moved as the participants saw fit. Sometimes these meetings were

relatively brief as topics were introduced and worked to a natural conclusion or plan for later. Sometimes sessions lasted significantly longer than their tentative schedule.

While pleased with this hopeful beginning, Dr. Anderson felt the group needed to institutionalize these sessions into its culture. Failing to do so might see the short term gains wiped out as the parties returned to previous hostilities.

The next session involved a light breakfast with a core group of elected officials and department heads. The conversation focused on how to sustain the air of optimism that currently permeated throughout River City. Cindy Clark, city clerk, suggested that pent up frustration with the previous state of affairs was fueling a movement toward positive thinking. Several others chimed in to support her claim. Next, Cindy went around the table asking and when necessary in her most persuasive way, soliciting comments, thoughts, and inputs. Helen Reardon, human resource director, recounted her grief at the loss of several quality employees because of the previously noxious situation. She called on everyone to embrace this trend or face more turnover from employees they could ill afford to lose. The group committed to continuing the sessions in perpetuity.

Getting Out Of the Office

Dr. Anderson was certainly pleased with the progress being made. He thought that getting everyone away from the office for some additional team building might be a welcome break. One of the players had previously mentioned a community sponsored canoe/raft race down a nearby creek. Participants would build their own rafts and race down the creek. Participants tended to focus on the enjoyment of the adventure versus a hard core competition. The flotilla usually included every kind of contraption that might float. They often did not float. This race was to end at a stream side park with lunch and tales of woe, rapids, canoe flips, and wildlife encounters. The group loved the idea.

DISCUSSION

The adage of cleaning house is simple and expedient; however, it may not be appropriate or practical. In addition, there is no guarantee that replacements are going to be more successful than the current personnel. Will the current focus on positive encouragement and shared mutual interest overcome long held animosities? Will short term gains revert to previously common negativity? Side note. This case was completed prior to the Covid 19 pandemic of 2020.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

How can elected officials who are charged with a legislative approach to their positions empower staff members?

What protocols can be put in place that will encourage an ongoing dialog amongst the River City's leadership, regular employees, and the general public?

How can rank and file city employees be encouraged to join in and be part of the process/solution?

Is Dr. Anderson's philosophy of staying positive with the city employees, council and general public sustainable?

How should the situation with malcontents and antagonists be handled? Should they be marginalized or encouraged to get on board?

Are outings like the canoe race a useful tool for encouraging trust?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of asynchronous communication?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous communication?

Synchronous/face-to-face communication played a key role in this case. How could asynchronous communication be used to compliment or augment synchronous communication?

What course should the change agent pursue with the mayor and his negative style of interaction?

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