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Municipal Applications of Organizational Engineering

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Abstract

Cities and other municipalities are virgin ground for the application of tools and methodologies that can improve human productivity and effectiveness. Conventional techniques requiring long sit down training sessions do not work. Traditional consulting methods that involve lengthy preparatory interviews are unaffordable. This article outlines a new approach targeted at delivering a more favorable working environment, major productivity increases and visible savings to all involved at an affordable price.

Municipal Applications of Organizational Engineering

By: Nicole Lemieux-Rever and Steve Sienkiewicz

Introduction

There are 87,525 local governments in the United States (2002, US Census Bureau). These are cities, towns and counties where people live and work. Whether we know it or not, we are all dependent. The efficiency and effectiveness of the people running these institutions matters. Flushing a toilet, getting a drink of water or driving on a plowed street are a tiny fraction of the services they provide and that we take for granted.

The value of these institutions is beyond doubt. Even so, they get precious little support. Investments in people, their most important asset, are usually at the bottom of the priority list, and it is getting worse. The number of cities taking action by "reducing municipal employment" more than doubled in the last 12 months (2004, Pagano). Fewer people are trying to do more with less.

Municipalities are fertile grounds for the organizational professional. But the usual ways do not work. Cities cannot afford to spend thousands of dollars a day for an advisor to define an issue. They do not have the manpower to sit around chatting with a consultant. Staffs do not have the time for multi-day training courses that may or may not affect their productivity. The 1970's approach is increasingly being rejected as wanting.

Then there is the "Mrs. Smolinski factor." Mrs. Smolinski is a term coined by Mayor Michael A. Guido, Dearborn, Michigan. She represents the typical city resident receiving city services (1996, Guido). "Mrs. Smolinski" puts a face on the citizen constituency. She is the one who digs in her purse to pay the taxes and service fees. She demands and deserves full value for her money.

A new approach is needed to keep Mrs. Smolinski happy. Cities need things that speak directly to the issues they face—solving problems, not talking about them. Cities need things that work on multiple programs, services and responsibilities that crisscross departmental lines. They need tools that can integrate outside contractors with inside staff. Learning needs to be done in hours, not days, months or years.

Fortunately, the new and proven tools of Organizational Engineering (OE) are in hand. This article reports on things the authors have done in Dearborn, Michigan. The use of OE directly impacted the quality of services to Mrs. Smolinski. This article is a case study in how this was accomplished.

Departmental Levels

Municipalities are typically organized into departments. As in any other group of humans, problems can and do arise in these units. It is hard to put a dollar value on them; however, they will affect Mrs. Smolinski in one way or another.

For example, I (Lemieux-Rever, co-author) worked with the newly appointed City of Dearborn Fire Chief in 2002. He went from being one of the Battalion Chiefs to being their boss. What had worked at peer level stopped working. Stress began to pile up at all levels of the department. Something was wrong and it was not getting better.

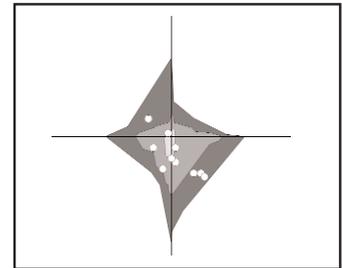
Fire Departments have a unique culture—tough, gruff people with lightning quick acid humor. They function more as a large family than as a city organization. These are the kind of people who went up the stairs at the World Trade Center without a second's pause. We need these kind of people, but they really can do a number on each other! Only half jokingly, the fire fighting motto (referring to group structure, not fire fighting and rescue techniques) is cited as "150 years of tradition unimpeded by progress."

After some discussion, the Fire Chief agreed that some insight into his "relationship" with his officers might be helpful. The first issue was the survey. Everyone needed to be certain that "I Opt" was not going to reveal anything personal. Many had been exposed to psychological tools and were not happy with the results. Firefighters are skeptical when not being downright cynical. They did not hesitate to share their feel-

ings on these earlier encounters. They needed a lot of assurance that "I Opt" was not that kind of tool. Stressing and illustrating the information processing nature of the tool ultimately won them over.

Once the data was in hand, the cause of the problems were obvious. The Chief was using a classic "Changer" pattern—new ideas (RI), quickly applied (RS). His officers tended toward the "Conservator" pattern. They preferred trusted methods methodically applied (LP/HA). They wanted high assurance of a positive outcome. The "Chicken Pox" graphic below shows the distribution of the group.

Graphic 1



As usual when applying "I Opt" technology, the results were almost instant. My coaching sessions with the Fire Chief began with reviewing the LeaderAnalysis™ and TeamAnalysis™. You could watch the light bulbs go off in his mind. The Fire Chief valued speedy resolution (RS) of issues. His officers valued a slower-paced, structured methodology (LP)—neither was right or wrong, but they were very different.

In the course of the debriefing, the Fire Chief began to develop a new management strategy. He continued to prefer a speedy resolution of issues; however, when an issue permitted, he would "back-off." On issues that did not benefit from fast resolution, the Battalion Chiefs could use their preferred LP/HA style. He would bite his lip and see what happened—what happened was good. Unsolicited comments from his staff members confirmed that tension had decreased. They felt more appreciated for the work they did. In addition, his view of people had changed. He really did appreciate them more. Everyone won, including Mrs. Smolinski.

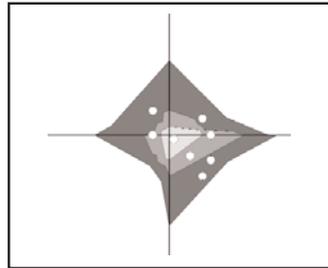
Another great example of the power of OE happened with the City of Dearborn Department of Public Works (DPW). If any group could give the Fire Department a run for their money it is the "He-Man" public works department. Skepticism and cynicism were the greeting cards for a new initiative. I (Sienkiewicz, co-author) was at the time the Superintendent of Sewerage. I offered the Director and the other Superintendents an opportunity to play in the OE sandbox.

We were aware that we worked well together when focused by emergencies. However, tensions were ever present. Projects that crisscrossed boundaries gave ample opportunity to display the strain. Duties that touched on multiple areas magnified it. Everyone knew that there was room for improvement, but concern about revealing personal matters again surfaced.

Stressing that only information processing preferences are involved captures people's interest. Examples drove home

the point. For instance, a person who pays attention to detail will always be slower than one who is willing to dispense with it. The difference in speed of response has nothing to do with psychology. It is just a natural offshoot of the way they choose to process information. I then explained the survey results were staying within the Department. The results were not going to become part of their personnel files. This kind of down-to-earth explanation made sense and closed the deal. Everyone agreed to participate.

Graphic 2



During the first debriefing session, there were many "aha" moments. The Director of DPW was using a "Perfector" pattern of idea generation (RI) and analysis (HA). His strategy could be summarized with "Great idea! Let's think about it." A majority of his direct reports used a "Conservator" pattern (LP/HA). They wanted to be absolutely certain that things were done right. This is best accomplished using trusted methods, not new ideas. They wanted exact procedures and hard facts, not analysis and possibilities. The reasons for at least some of the tensions became evident. No one was right or wrong. The tension was just the inter-

play of two different, equally legitimate perspectives.

The biggest "aha" around the room was that the styles of the superintendents seemed to fit the jobs they were assigned to. For example, the Powerhouse superintendent is a highly committed Logical Processor. His ideal is methodical action that gives certainty of outcome. He is just the person you want working on boiler systems. Other superintendents were also well positioned to carry out their duties. The light went on. There was nothing wrong with the staffing.

This was the moment the DPW Director saw his superintendents in a different light. He saw that their strategic styles were perfect for the jobs they were doing. The very things that made them good at their jobs were what occasionally put them at odds with his desire to innovate and analyze (RI/HA). The tension that everyone was feeling was a natural outcome of the interplay of styles that were ideal for the jobs to be done. Mrs. Smolinski has nothing to worry about.

At the end of the first session, the Director asked his superintendents if they found value in the OE technology. The Water Superintendent is a quiet, more than once burned, warrior. He is also a committed Logical Processor. He responded immediately. His reaction was totally unexpected. He said that OE was so valuable he wanted to offer it to his entire staff. Mouths hung open around the room. After closing their mouths, there was agreement that OE technology had real world value. This is a high compliment from people who do not pass out compliments easily.

There were still more steps in the process. Like many other cities, Dearborn found itself in a budget crunch. If ways were not found to save some money, we would have to ask Mrs. Smolinski to dig deeper into her purse. This would not make her happy. Merging the Water and Sewerage Divisions offered itself as a way of enjoying some savings.

The proposed merger created stress and anxiety. Many of the operational staff are Logical Processors. They really needed a detailed plan on what was going to be done and when it was going to happen. "How" was the primary question. Unfortunately, merger planning is a strategic map. It gives general directions and explanations of "why" those directions were chosen. The detail simply evolves as it is put into play.

One of these "details" concerned continuity. A city-wide early retirement package was offered. Among those leaving were the Water and Sewerage superintendents. This meant that valuable knowledge would be leaving. They knew the things not written down anywhere. They knew how to work the system to get things done. They were leaving at the very time when the merger promised to magnify risk exposure. Mrs. Smolinski has clothes to wash, kids to bathe and likes her coffee in the morning. She would not be happy if something bad happened to her water or sewer services.

The merger was rolling. Time was not available to fill in the details of the merger plan. As one of the retiring superintendents (Sienkiewicz, co-author), I proposed that we invest in all the staff both individually and as work teams.

After all, these were the people who were going to be there to take care of Mrs. Smolinski. These men and women are the most valuable asset within the system. The investment promised to pay both short- and long-term returns.

As with the supervisory staff, the 40 plus staff members were dominated by the LP/HA styles. Again, skepticism and cynicism were present. Now rumors intensified the uncertainty. The information processing approach was explained once again. The sociological basis of the tool was outlined. Reassurances were given that it would not reveal anything personal. The results would stay within the department. Again, people accepted the survey.

The debriefing took place on a late summer morning under a pavilion in one of the most beautiful parks in Dearborn. I (Lemieux-Rever, co-author) reviewed the "I Opt Change" reports with 40+ staff members. The Water Superintendent stepped up to the plate and put things into perspective. In an emotionally choked voice he explained that the future is uncertain. He said the merger is an organic process. Our goal is to help them to face the unknown. Just as in nature, this organic process needs to be nurtured. This set a positive tone.

At this point I explained that the OE technology represented an investment in them. It would help them work together to tend the "garden" while the organic process worked its way to conclusion. We showed that they would have a better way to relate to whoever became the new superintendent. They would also be better able to post for the promotions that would arise. There was something in it for them as well as for

the City of Dearborn and Mrs. Smolinski.

We accomplished what we set out to do. Logical Processors and Hypothetical Analyzers now had a track to run on. They had part of the "how" and "why" answered for them. They were no longer "swinging in the breeze." They could now use their new tools to move forward.

So what? Was there any meaningful impression? Those skeptical "down to earth" operational folks want to continue using/learning about OE and other team building skills. The two divisions continue to support each other as individuals and as teams working in the new group. The people involved got new tools and points of view that will serve them well.

There are more benefits. The DPW Director continues to be surprised with the ease of the transition. A new vocabulary has appeared. Discussions now contain phrases like, "I need my HA time before I make that decision" or "we need your RS self." These phrases are easily accepted without negative judgment. The discussion is now focused on the issues and not the emotions. Mrs. Smolinski is going to get good service well into the future.

Contrast both the Fire Department and DPW experience with other approaches. In neither case was it a "kumbuya" meeting with everyone holding hands and singing. In a few hours of consulting a foundation was laid. The result was not a "love-fest" with everyone feeling good for 15 minutes. It was an understanding of a process that people can keep the rest of their lives. Lasting

results had been delivered on an economical and timely basis.

Program Levels

Municipalities undertake big projects. Roads and sewers are not cheap. For example, in 1996 local government capital outlays were \$99.9 billion or \$599 per person (2000, U.S. Census Bureau). These projects always involve consultants and contractors. These people must work with city staffs and political leaders. This offers an opportunity for the organizational professional.

I (Sienkiewicz, co-author) have been involved in many large-scale projects. As a city executive (Dearborn, Michigan) I watched costs rise and schedules slip. I saw zeal change to stress. The skills of consultants, contractors, and city personnel were questioned. Reputations were hurt. Profitability suffered. Mrs. Smolinski was not happy. Getting the city, consultants, and contract people to work together is serious business.

The nature of city contracting magnifies the exposure. Project budgets are tight. They allow little room for any kind of error. They are also heavily time-constrained. State and federal regulations require performance on a timeline. Slippage can mean a loss of real money. And, the projects are BIG. For example, a combined sewer overflow system for Dearborn, Michigan carries a price tag of \$270,000,000. Even small misses can mean big dollars.

Many project problems are the result of simple miscommunication. Only it is not as simple as it seems. Any communication depends on assumptions. For example, a request to have debris

remove from a location sounds simple enough. The assumption is that the contractor will do this when time is available. The contractor "hears" that the debris is to be removed NOW. A work crew is redirected. Something that the redirected crew was working on is not done. The schedule slips. Who is at fault?

Unsaid assumptions are the source of the above problem. The person requesting the removal might be a Hypothetical Analyzer. They would assume that any activity would be preceded by an assessment of consequences. The person hearing the request could be a Reactive Stimulator. An RS assumes that time is always critical. The miscommunication is obvious. But its cause is not.

OE shows that the chance for error is pervasive. Every style carries its own assumptions. The average overlap of any two people is 45% (Nelson, 2004). This means that there is a 55% chance that the two people could be coming out of different strategic styles at a particular point. Every misalignment is an opening for error and higher costs.

For example, a Relational Innovator sees an issue as a chance to devise a new approach. Another person may be coming out of the Logical Processor position. For her, it is obvious that using trusted methods is the right course. The approach is "obvious" to both people. Neither needs to tell the other about the obvious. The seeds for future problems have been planted.

The issues thus far have been rational. However, they can quickly grow into the more powerful area of emotions. All of the parties see the problem. A natural

human response is to assign a "cause." The real cause is invisible. So, people manufacture causes. It is because the other person is insincere, malicious, devious or uncaring. You can add as many more items to the list as you choose. Once this transition from rational to emotional happens, trust is compromised.

In this context, trust is "the inter-relationship of sincerity, competence, and reliability" (Giovanna Morchio 2003). Once these have been compromised, costs begin to rise. Once trust is gone people begin to "cover their tails." "Working to rules" is one way of protecting yourself. It is a natural shield. Counter-intuitively, this increases risk geometrically. The reason is that people have now begun to focus on themselves. The project is sacrificed to protect individual interests.

The loss of trust is predictable. It is a result of "reasonable" expectations not being met. This outcome can be predicted even before people meet each other. Tools that can stop the spiral before it starts are in the OE toolbox (1996 and 2000, Salton). City, consultant and contractor staffs can put these tools into play with a small amount of time, effort and very little expense. It is a small step that can pay big dividends.

The co-authors have worked with many groups that bridged boundaries. Problems that do not fit neatly into organizational boxes are a key factor affecting cities. The ability to work across these divisions is "critical" to fixing the problems cities face (1998, National League of Cities). The results of using OE with these groups are the same as within a single department.

People come to understand and value different processing styles. They focus on issues without having to change. Things get better fast.

Conclusion

Organizational Engineering works. It is inexpensive, fast and delivers results that last. I (Sienkiewicz, co-author) have retired from the city and joined my co-author at Learning and Performance Systems (www.peoplegro.com). The firm links "real world" municipal experience with OE technology. This commitment is a testimony to my belief in the power of and the need for OE.

The co-authors of this paper believe municipalities and allied governmental bodies are an underserved market. Consultants who are prepared to deliver results quickly and economically face virgin fields of opportunity. Our motive in writing this article is to encourage others to engage this untapped market. The momentum will help us all. Cities talk to each other. Success one place will make it easier to land clients in another. The market is so vast that all of us together will not dent the demand.

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