

Organisational Constellation Case Study

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Background

Clackamas County Fire District 1 covers 170 square miles and is the second largest fire district in Oregon with twelve fire stations, and over two hundred fire fighters and paramedics serving 145,000 people. The District was formed in 1996 by merging eight smaller districts into one consolidated district. Most of the former District Chiefs now reported to a new Fire Chief who was hired from outside. The challenges facing the organisation involved integrating a number of differences into the new system, such as distinct sub-cultures, different management styles and ways of relating to the local communities, as well as differences in equipment and fire-fighting methods.

Presenting Problems

As we began our work in the autumn of 2000, there were three main problem areas resulting from the merger:

Internal operations within the organisation, especially with regard to people management, equipment, information flow and organisational structure.

Organisational issues with respect to different operating contexts. For instance, fighting fires required a different set of skills from interfacing with the state legislature over fire codes.

The skills deficit resulting from the merger of smaller districts into one large district. The larger district required different skills than those of the old units, which is why the new Fire Chief was hired from the "outside".

The management style relevant to handling emergencies, i.e. a paramilitary command-and control style with a clear hierarchy of accountability, worked less effectively in the new District. The new organisation was now dominated by less structured activities such as fire prevention, business inspection, community education, administration, training, financial affairs, management, and community and inter-governmental relations.

The underlying conflicts erupted when the Chief sought to promote a Captain to the position of Deputy Chief and Director of Business and Finance because he was the most capable member in the organisation to deal with these new issues. This would have moved

him up five levels in the hierarchy. However, this violated the established promotion process in which applicants first took a civil service examination and were then interviewed for the next level. The attempt to circumvent the normal procedure and to reach down within the organisation created a furore at all levels, from union to management.

What We Did

Over a six-month period, we used constellation work to develop a more effective organisational structure and to support a growing transformation in attitude towards change. The five steps we took were as follows:

Convincing the Fire Chief

We met with the Fire Chief and won his agreement to use constellation work by demonstrating a constellation. We invited him to place paper shapes on the floor to represent his *Management Team*, the *District Board of Directors*, and *The Public*. Kent stood as the representative for each position while Jane facilitated. The Chief was sufficiently impressed with the accuracy of the information we uncovered to authorise us to continue.

Constellation Interviews

Each member of the eight management teams was interviewed individually. Everyone was given a stack of small "people cards" to label with the names of the personnel they considered the most important persons within their team. They were then asked to position their cards on a paper grid. This acted as a boundary so we could see who was "in" the system and who was "out". They were asked to place the five most important people and to show their "relationship" to each other in terms of "how things really worked". By limiting the numbers, we were able to identify which team members were most highly valued and how they related to the rest of the organisation. The management teams' responses to the proposed promotion were unanimously negative and the Chief withdrew his proposal. This still left unanswered the question of how best to manage the new structure.

Management Team Constellations

We then met with the senior Management Team for an afternoon. Based on the information from the

initial interviews, we set up constellations. We assigned each participant to represent a position that they were not currently holding. So, for example, the operations manager stood in the position of the human resources manager. The managers were comfortable and willing to stand in each other's positions, possibly because many of them had experienced different roles in their original, smaller districts.

We were unable to find a resolution that afternoon but two important findings emerged. Firstly, for this District, it was the **context** that determined the management structure best suited to respond to the different tasks of the organisation. Secondly, it was clear there was an "elephant in the room" that everyone could "see", but no one was willing to name. One team member in a position of substantial authority was not up to the task and neither the team members nor the Fire Chief were prepared to address the issue directly.

The benefit of this session was that the management team saw how they were functioning as a group. Most of the managers said this experience improved their appreciation of each other's role in the organisation.

Team-building Session

Subsequently we held a one-day team-building session that included the senior management team, several Battalion Chiefs (next level down), and the Programme Managers. We addressed how people related to their job, whether they were primarily "people" or "task" oriented. The Chief was at the extreme end of the task-oriented group. The "liaisons" in the organisation, that is, those people to whom the Chief turned to "get things done," were more "people" oriented. Much of the dissatisfaction in the merged organisation had to do with the loss of the "family feeling" of the original, smaller organisations. In bringing up the District to international technical standards, the "people" part of the organisation had suffered. This was a revelation to the Chief and he immediately set out to remedy this. He visited all twelve fire stations to explain his view of the District's strategic direction and to answer staff questions.

However, the issue of how to best organise his management team still remained unresolved.

Resolution

In our last meeting with the Chief and the Management Team, we used a questionnaire that

enabled team members to discover their individual managerial strengths and weaknesses. Then we discussed how these might help to determine who was best suited for the various positions on the management team. We gave everyone a set of eight, small "people cards" and asked them, if they were in charge, how they would organise the team to get the best results. Each member then labelled the cards and set up a "desktop constellation". Then we went around the room and each member explained his ideal organisation to the group.

Surprisingly, every team member placed the "elephant" manager in the same position including the "elephant" manager himself. This new position reduced his responsibilities and impact on the organisation. We were then able to assist the team to arrive at an organisational structure that better addressed the various contexts faced by the District, and that placed the best team members in the various functional positions.

With our help and the use of constellations, team members did "the right thing" for the good of the organisation. By the following summer, there was evidence of a high level of support for the new organisation structure and the changes in posts that had been necessary to accomplish it.

What We learned

- It is possible to set up effective constellations within an organisation using team members themselves. A careful framing of the set-up is important. By placing members in different positions than their own we received some valuable diagnostic information.
- Context matters in an organisation. Emergency responses, community and governmental relationships, and intra-organisational management, all require a different organisational response. Managers must be flexible and able to adapt their styles to meet the requirements of the various operating contexts of the District.
- Within the "we're a family" culture of this organisation, it was important to provide the team members with an indirect way to address the issue of the "elephant" manager. Framing the exercise as an imaginary "you're in charge for a day" and using the constellation "people cards" allowed the team members to find the right place for him.

In conclusion, we were also interested to explore the differences between organisation and family constellations. Our summary is as follows:

Orggnisgtion Constellations

Focus is on the good of the organisation rather than the individual.

Focus is on producing a product or service, and the organisation wants to see an increase in effectiveness and efficiency as a result of the constellation work.

Primarily concerned with how individual actions affect the system.

Issues can be intra-group - within the group itself, and also inter-group - the group with other groups.

Different goals can emerge from different contexts or functions of the organisation.

Government and non-profit organisation outcome is to implement policy for the benefit of the maximum number of people.
Business outcome is profit for owners and shareholders.

Membership is voluntary

Familv Constellations

Focus is on the individual.

Typically the purpose is healing and/or insight for the individual.

More often concerned with how the system affects individual actions and choices.

Typically concerned with the family itself.

One context - that of the family.

Goals of family - continuation of the system ("people-making," to quote Virginia Sotir)

Born into it and can't leave.

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