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Organizational Change: My Perspective

On September 27, 2019, I became the Police Chief for the City of Ithaca, NY Police Department. This appointment was exactly 24 years to the day from when I took my very first oath as a new officer in September of 1995! Thus, as an established member of the policing profession, I feel that I am well-versed in the police culture, including the associated resistance to change that exists within it. Upon my start in Ithaca, I noted that the organization was operating via a model in which priorities were not fully aligned with the mission and activities were not commensurate with current resources. Sadly, there had been a failure to adapt to multiple environment changes and the agency was akin to an organism functioning in a closed system which could not survive.¹

For context, I came to Ithaca with over two decades of prior law enforcement experience, and five of those years were as a successful chief in a nearby city. I became the leader of my former Department during tumultuous times; there had been significant disdain towards my predecessor and mistrust existed within the community. Change was needed so I applied the leadership skills that I cultivated throughout my career and subsequently honed at the FBI National Academy. All officers united and worked in a complimentary manner to improve our image and reestablish trust. We became the machine metaphor of organizational theory, except with a keen human element.² Three years later, we were state accredited and had a renewed community standing.

Ithaca was different, however, in that I came to the Department from the outside, so I needed to devise a different approach to change. As University of San Diego President, James T. Harris III, stated with regard to coming into an organization, “the number one thing is to listen and not move forward too quickly.”³ Likewise, Retired Chief, Gary Morrison, from the Carlsbad, California Police Department asserted in part, “it is important to understand the culture of where you are going and see what they do well.”⁴ As luck would have it, I had the fortune of working under a leader who came into my prior municipality from the outside and earned respect quickly by listening and learning before making changes. I knew that this was the pathway which I too must follow in Ithaca. The foundation of the Ithaca Police Department was solid, and the agency was comprised of officers who cared deeply about the community. Just as President Harris switched roles with his students to understand their perspectives, I too had to spend time learning from my officers to discover what was important to them.⁵ This activity proved to be invaluable.

Proudly, I can report that as a team, we are evolving, and our organization is functioning in a manner now analogous to a brain. We are applying methods of double-loop learning and making operational adjustments as needed to be in harmony with our environment.⁶ This adaptation and priority reorganization has been vital towards maintaining stability with staffing and resources.

As a law enforcement leader, it is crucial to understand the concepts of organizational theory because these ideas formulate the means by which challenges are identified and corrected. I am inspired the most by viewing organizations through the metaphorical lens of an organism. This broad approach acknowledges the necessity to continually adapt to ecological and environmental changes. Just as the police leadership in Escondido, California effectively altered their practices to meet a dramatic increase in population and a change in demographics, so too must every chief realize that external factors may require internal changes to be made to meet new dynamics.⁷

Philosophically, the other means by which I am inspired to view organizations is via the brain metaphor. As Gareth Morgan states in his book, *Images of Organization*, “organizational learning is a priority for organizations to deal with the challenges in a turbulent world.”⁸ The current climate of law enforcement epitomizes instability, thus a mindset focused upon continual learning, growth, and evolution as defined within this metaphor is key. As I lead my agency, I am constantly learning and noticing nuances in processes and procedures. This ability to watch how things are done and understand why they are done in that manner before making changes has helped me grow as a leader. Southwest Airlines represents a brilliant example of wisdom in this area in that they achieved tremendous success by knowing what to change and what to leave as is.⁹ Having the insight to recognize which fundamentals are immutable is the mark of genius.

My leadership style has always been focused on the human elements because everything else is inconsequential if we lose sight of the people who we lead and serve. A quote which most strongly resonates with me is again from President Harris who described an early life experience in which he was only known by his work nametag. He cites a story whereby his grandmother told him to “never forget what it feels like to be invisible.”¹⁰ The value of this is enormous in that too often, those in roles of leadership or power forget what it is like to be non-influential. As a leader, it is essential to believe that everyone has value and equally, to treat them as such.

As we move into the future, it is paramount that we create relationships to change the narrative that has been propagated about policing. When we as leaders recognize ourselves in the plights of others, we humanize our badges and become part of the solution. Seeing subordinates as visible, fosters a collaborative approach and in turn, improves the quality of services we provide.

The story of Bob Nardelli, former CEO of Home Depot, who focused solely on data and profits underscores the antithesis of quality leadership. He did not care about the people behind the company and as a result, destroyed morale and created high turnover.¹¹ It is true that data has value, as evidenced by the way in which the Oakland A's became a great team through the analytical application of statistics to improve their winnings.¹² With that, however, we as leaders must only allow data to guide us as we endeavor to treat people as our most valued assets. To me, this is true leadership and the foundation needed for positive organizational change to occur.

References

¹ Images of Organization; Morgan, Gareth; Sage Publications; 2006; P. 38-40

² Ibid P. 21

³ LEPSL 560 Organizational Theory and Change; Module 6, Presentation 2; Presidential Leadership and Organizational Culture; Fritsvold Erik, Dr. and Harris, James T III, Dr.; 2m46s

⁴ LEPSL 560 Presentation 4.1; Organizations as Brains; Fritsvold, Eric Dr. and Morrison, Gary Chief (Ret.) 3m-3m30s

⁵ Ibid; 8m13s

⁶ Morgan; P. 85-87

⁷ LEPSL 560, Module 3.1 Presentation; Policing in a City of Change; A critical Application of the Organism Metaphor; Fritsvold, Eric Dr. and Loarie, Michael Captain; Escondido PD

⁸ Morgan; P. 84

⁹ LEPSL 560 Organizational Theory and Change; Mod 7. Presentation 2; Jim Collins Talks About his Book, "Built to Last." 13m22s

¹⁰ LEPSL 560 Organizational Theory and Change; Module 6, Presentation 2; Presidential Leadership and Organizational Culture; Fritsvold Erik, Dr. and Harris, James T III, Dr.; 5m38s

¹¹ Out at Home Depot; Behind the Flameout of Controversial CEO Bob Nardelli; Grow, Brian; Businessweek; Jan. 15, 2007

¹² Your Company's Secret Change Agents; Harvard Business Review; May 2005; P. 77