Fixing Maintenance- A Story of Change in a County Public Agency

By Jamie O. Harris and Donn C. Hatcher

This is the story of change in a public agency – the maintenance division of a county public works department. It's an important story because it tells how involving the whole system in change from the beginning supports lasting change, how consultants and clients learn together through a flexible action research approach, and how keeping ownership of change with the client contributes to the continuation of change after the consultant leaves the scene. The story is also about the courage of working men and women to face tough issues, learn new ways of working, and stay a long and uncertain course to transform their organization.

The county involved in this story has a population over 1 million people. The maintenance division employed about 100 people in the maintenance division with an annual budget about one quarter of the entire public works department annual budget. Names of individuals have been changed and individual situations disguised somewhat to respect privacy, but the story is true to fact.

The Request

Through a referral we were approached by a deputy director of the public works department and the chief of the maintenance division with a request for consulting services. Would we facilitate a one or two day offsite meeting for the entire maintenance division? They had held such an "all hands" offsite meeting several years before and thought it had been helpful in reducing some of the hostility and friction existing at the time.

Our response to this request was shaped by the philosophy and discipline of process consultation (Schein 1987):

> "People often sense that all is not well or that things could be better, but they do not have the tools with which to translate their vague feelings into concrete action steps. Process

> consultation does not assume that the manager or the organization knows what is wrong, or what is needed, or what the consultant should do. All that is required for the process to begin constructively is some intent on the part of someone in the organization to improve the way things are going.

Thus, rather than launch into an agreement to plan an offsite, we were impelled to inquire further, both to gather more information for ourselves about the situation, and, equally importantly, to facilitate the thinking and learning of our prospective clients about the nature of the problem.

Upon inquiry about why they wanted to do an all hands meeting and what issues they hoped to address we were told, among other things:

- There was a long history of labor-management conflict in the division.
- The chief of the division, an experienced engineer, was planning to implement a comprehensive computer based maintenance management system to better monitor quality, costs, and overall division performance. He hoped that the maintenance management system would help the division become able to compete with private maintenance contractors in order to expand the division. He anticipated (rightly it turned out) significant resistance to such a new management tool as employees might perceive it to be a threat to their jobs or a management attempt to assert greater control over them.
- Performance and management difficulties in the division were widely recognized throughout the county, even up to the Board of Supervisors level. The county administrator had directed public works management to do something to reduce friction in the maintenance division. The employees' union ranked the division at the lowest level of any agency in the county in employee satisfaction in its periodic "report card." There was open hostility and fear of litigation.
- Both managers feared that failure to significantly improve the work climate and performance of the division would lead to out-sourcing of maintenance work to private contractors, or other drastic consequences.

Given the complexity and longevity of the issues they were describing, we suggested that a one or two day offsite would probably not have long term impact and would likely turn out to be a waste of money. We proposed instead a diagnostic assessment to gather in depth feedback from the whole

system in order to develop a fact based understanding of the issues that would take into account multiple perspectives. We proposed to give the feedback to the whole organization and then work with the leadership to co-design a change intervention based on the findings. Fortunately the client leaders quickly saw the value of gathering objective data and involving the whole organization in diagnosis as a means of building a foundation for possible change. They acted to secure approval for a contract covering an organizational assessment, diagnosis and feedback.

The Assessment

The assessment design was based on collaborative principles. From the start of data collection we aimed to involve the whole organization in an open and visible process in the interest of building transparency and trust. (Weisbord 1987, Ault, Walton & Childers, 1998) Following an introductory meeting with supervisors and superintendents and a written communication to all employees announcing our presence and intentions, we conducted one on one structured interviews with the top leaders (public works director, deputy director in charge of maintenance, and chief of the division) the three superintendents, about half of the ten supervisors and a sampling of about 15 line employees of all grades. (See Appendix for an organization chart of the division at the beginning of the intervention.) We also conducted two focus group sessions of about two hours each with additional union represented employees for additional line employee input.

Based on the extensive interview and focus group data, we designed a confidential written employee survey consisting of approximately 40 Likert scaled questions to be submitted to all employees from the division chief on down. Consistent with the overall strategy of openly involving employees in the diagnosis, we submitted a draft of the survey questions to both management and the employees' committee and union business representative for input before finalizing the survey. Several questions were either modified or added at the specific request of the union represented employees. While the survey was confidential, the form provided responders a place to indicate whether they were management or union represented. The response rate to the survey was quite high – 63% of all the division employees returned a completed survey and 56% of those who responded wrote in additional comments in spaces provided as well as answering all of the Likert scaled questions.

The interviews and focus groups revealed that the maintenance division was plagued with hostility, lack of trust, a vigorous rumor mill, racial tension and an "old (white) boy network." In the kick-off meeting with management and supervisors, there was open hostility from some senior level managers to our presence. Two of the superintendents (the highest level of management under the chief) wore dark glasses for the entire indoors meeting and refused to speak to the deputy director or to us. There was demonstrative body language suggesting a lack of willingness to participate.

In the first minutes of the first interview with an employee we'll call David, Mr. Harris was told of the strength of the rumor mill in the maintenance division. David said, "You know Mr. Harris, the story going around the yard about you is that you were hired because your children go to the same pre-school as the deputy director's." Mr. Harris' children are all out of high school and he hasn't been around a pre-school for many years, but it was wonderful to hear the story to find out very quickly some of the things we were up against!

There was a consistent tone of anger and pain in the interviews and the focus groups. We heard complaints of unfairness, lack of respect for employees, punitive treatment, racism, favoritism, failure to deal with performance problems, fear of retribution, mistrust of management, and, among the older employees, a yearning for the good old days (15 or 20 years ago) when it was perceived to have been a big happy family in the maintenance division. Especially among the superintendents and supervisors there was a sense of "just hanging on" until retirement. It was not a fun place to work or even to learn about! As consultants it was both heart rending and a bit frightening to discover ourselves in the midst of such challenging and systemic agony.

Feedback

Consistent with an open collaborative approach to potential change, our assessment design called for feedback to be given to the whole organization, not just to management. While there were smart and caring people throughout the division, many of the front line employees had at best a middle school to high school education. Thus we wanted the feedback to be in direct easily understandable terms, not consultants' jargon. Yet we also needed to have a theoretical rigor for analysis and presentation of the data.

Balancing these two important professional interests, we interpreted and prepared the data for feedback applying two conceptual models developed by Interaction Associates. The first one we call "R-P-R" and the second "D-C-C."

R-P-R describes three inter-related dimensions of organizational success and sustainability. For a work group, team or whole organization to sustain success over time members must experience balanced satisfaction on all three dimensions: *results* (achievement of goals, growth, the bottom line, etc.), *process* (how the work gets done, systems and organizational processes) and *relationship* (feeling respected, trust, openness, inclusion). Continuous frustration or breakdowns in one dimension typically lead to breakdowns and frustrations in other dimensions. The R-P-R model suggests to leaders that hammering away on one dimension, typically results, with insufficient attention to good work process and respectful relationships, may produce performance under stress for a while, but eventually will produce serious organizational dysfunctionality.

(RPR graphic, copyright, Interaction Associates, Inc - Attachment)

D-C-C is a simple yet powerful model describing the requisite components of successful organizational change. To foster intentional change in an organization there needs to be

- clear ***D****irection* (values, vision, mission, strategy, leadership) to guide and motivate,
- widespread ***C****ommitment* (sense of ownership and involvement among organization members and stakeholders) to support and act for change, and
- assurance of appropriate ***C****apability* (supporting systems, processes and skills, both individual and organizational) to enable people to behave successfully in the changed organization.

(DCC model, copyright, Interaction Associates, Inc. - Attachment)

Designing and leading organizational change requires balanced attention to all three components. The Direction-Commitment-Capability model reminds us that stating a vision won't get you there no matter how well it is communicated if people don't have the skills needed to act in new ways demanded of them by the vision of the future. Skills training won't create significant lasting change in an organization if there isn't widespread

commitment to change or if leadership fails to provide a clear direction for change that is supported by the training.

With these two models in the background, intensive study of the voluminous interview, focus group and survey data led us to interpret what was going on in the division through focus on eight key themes:

1. There was a significant and damaging *lack of trust* throughout the organization. Supervisors did not trust one another. Employees did not trust management and vice-versa. Employees did not trust one another. Illustrative comments included statements like: "There's no trust here at all." "Some co-workers will do or say anything to get ahead." "Negative politics, ass kissing, self-interest and the 'good old boy' network are hard at work here." "This is a cut-throat place to work." Only 28% of survey respondents agreed with the statement "I trust management to do the right thing," and not even all the management respondents agreed with this statement.
2. Employee *morale* was extremely bad and getting worse. "People are fed up and the last 5 or 6 years have been the worst." "It's a headache to work here." "I think the division sucks." "I'm hearing a real bitter cry now." Only 12% of survey responders agreed with the statement "Employee morale in the division is good," and 72% disagreed with the statement "People are held accountable for their job performance in a fair way at all levels in the division."
3. There was lack of common *vision and goals* for the future. "The division does not work towards goals as a whole. Crews don't see how they fit into the big picture." "Management vision extends to 5:30." At best there was merely confusion about vision and goals, but worse, there was widespread fear of hidden agendas, such as "They want to take our work away from us," and "They want to break the union."
4. There were widespread *negative perceptions of leadership*. Some individual supervisors were liked and respected, even sought after by employees, but in general, the leadership of the division was perceived to be divided and divisive, and not responsive to employee input and concerns. "Management just prefers to give directives and receive no feedback." Managers "don't trust themselves" and "can be petty, competitive and childish." "Backstabbing is the local pastime" among supervisors and superintendents. "Militaristic" management

"belittles people." Managers "aren't held accountable." Only 14% agreed with the statement "The supervisors work well together."

5. Effective *communication* was not happening, up, down or sideways. There was a destructive rumor mill and fear that speaking up would lead at best to no response or at worst to retaliation. "The superintendents don't communicate together." "People get labeled and punished if they speak out; retribution is alive and well." "I feel I won't get promotions because I've spoken out in the past." In the survey 68% disagreed that there is open and honest communication between employees and management.
6. Employees held growing concerns about *job security and lack of advancement.* There was fear of contracting out the division's work to private sector contractors, anger over several unfilled job vacancies, and a belief that advancement depended on the "good old boy network," race, and "ass kissing" rather than merit. "Management has decided to contract out without conferring with us – the reasons given for contracting out don't match the decisions." "Contracting out is used improperly and punitive. Greed and self interest seem to be the driving force." "It takes forever to fill a vacancy, we have qualified people, but they're not being offered the opportunities." Hiring equipment operators from outside "threatens our job security." People move up based on "their friends, not their skills." "Things are not merit based here."
7. Job *safety* was a major concern receiving inadequate attention. Maintenance crews work along highways and expressways in close proximity to fast moving vehicles. They work with heavy equipment. They use or work around herbicides and other dangerous chemicals daily. Physical labor with shovels, pavement rakes and hand tools risks strains and soft tissue injuries. They sometimes encounter aggressive people, hazardous materials and have to work in difficult terrains. There was also a lot of concern about drug use by some employees and fear of some employees with a tendency to act violently towards co-workers. While employees strongly agreed on the importance of safety, the previously established safety committee was essentially non-functional. It was felt that the safety discipline process was being used punitively and arbitrarily. "The disciplinary department is out of control."
8. Lastly, there was a lot of desire for change but widespread *skepticism and resistance* to the idea that positive change could actually happen. "If changes do not come, the maintenance division will self destruct."

> "Thank-you for trying, but I don't think this survey will help." "Will we truly get any help after this survey?" Over half of survey respondents agreed with the statement "I don't think management is willing to change" and 68% either agreed or were neutral as to the statement "I don't think represented employees are willing to change."

Having sorted the data into themes the next step was to provide the feedback to the division. We believed it was essential for the whole organization to hear the results of the assessment in order to begin the difficult conversations that would be needed for change. The importance of open and "unvarnished" feedback is a lesson that is constantly refreshed through research and experience:

> "Public, organization wide conversations about . . . fundamental issues are difficult and likely to be painful. But pain contributes to a species' survival by triggering learning and adaptation; it can have the same effect on organizations. Businesses and the people inside them don't learn to change unless they have the courage to confront difficult truths." (Beer and Eistentat 2004)

The assessment results were printed in a written report organized around the themes described above. We included supporting data in the form of quotes from the interviews and the employee survey results. We chose to include graphic presentation of the results of all survey questions so that everyone could see the data in a simple bar chart format. We reviewed this written report first with the deputy director and division chief as a courtesy, but no changes in our report were intended from this review and none were made. Given the low level of trust and high levels of fear that were so apparent from the data, we decided to present the feedback in two back-to-back separate sessions with the represented employees and the management group (director, deputy, chief, superintendents and supervisors.)

Trust was so low that in the represented employees' session many expressed suspicion that the information presented to management was different from what they were hearing. Fortunately, by prior agreement, the employees' union business agent attended both sessions and he was able to assure the represented employees that the same report and information was in fact presented in both sessions. Employees were next suspicious that the report would be "swept under the rug." Many said the report was true and accurate, really representing how they felt to work in the Division, and as such it would be suppressed. They demanded to know if copies of the report

would be made available to them to keep. They were assured that copies would be given to the union and the employee's committee as well as management. This in itself, for some, was a significant marker of legitimacy of the process that they had not expected.

Although both feedback meetings were tense and fractious, in the end in both sessions there was broad agreement with the ultimate summary of our findings which said:

> "While many employees like their specific jobs, there are serious issues in the Maintenance division that need to be addressed urgently by management and employees. Morale is low. Trust is lacking, especially trust in management. There is widespread perception of favoritism in promotions and lack of accountability. Employees do not perceive that there is a common vision or set of goals for the future. Employees at all levels perceive that the superintendents and supervisors do not work will together to lead the Division effectively. There is fear of retaliation. Poor communication and mis-trust lead to a destructive rumor mill. There is a lot of suspicion and skepticism about whether anything will change for the better."

A dismal picture indeed, but the positive thing was that for the first time the whole organization saw the same picture presented publicly in the same way and employees were able to discuss it openly, if angrily, among their peers.

Developing the Intervention Proposal

Given the depth, difficulty and history of the issues, it was not hard for the public works director and deputy director to agree that a significant systemic intervention was the only real hope for real change. Our proposed intervention was based on the Direction-Commitment-Capability model described above. It emphasizes the importance of clarifying direction and leadership, building commitment through involvement and transparency, and developing the capabilities needed for performance in a new more flexible and more collaborative organization. Thus an inter-related sequence of activities was indicated, starting at the "top" and working successively deeper and deeper into the organization. The design included a large dose of skills development, especially skills to help people work together more collaboratively.

The public works director enthusiastically embraced this approach and did some tough work required to secure funding approval in a time of very tight county budgets. In this he was helped by the fact that the problems in the maintenance division were well known to the county administrator and the board of supervisors. In fact, they had very directly challenged him to "do something about the maintenance division" when he took on the director position. The importance of strong sponsorship and support from the director throughout the change effort cannot be overemphasized.

Building Leadership Team Alignment

The first task was to try to build a leadership team where none had existed before. The public works department was a very traditional hierarchical organization, characterized by multiple levels of management and traditional solid line reporting relationships from the director to deputy directors, to division chiefs, superintendents, supervisors, etc. The concept of a leadership "team" was entirely new to the top level officers of the department and building a "team at the top" can often be challenging. (Katzenbach 1993) Although the director, deputy and division chief frequently talked with each other, it was always in strict hierarchical chain of command, not in a sense of working together as a management team. Not surprisingly therefore, we found that they had never really discussed, much less agreed upon, core values, mission, vision or goals for change for the maintenance division. The public works department had a published vision and values statement, displayed on the walls in headquarters, but it was little known to employees in the maintenance yards. Nor had it been tailored in any way to the specific situation of the maintenance division which was significantly different in work processes, general education levels, location and culture from the engineering and development oriented functions of the rest of the public works department. The employees in the maintenance division had little idea of what the public works director thought about the future of the division.

Working with the director we helped establish a "top team" of four individuals; the director, the deputy director in charge of maintenance, the division chief, and the newly hired director of maintenance operations ("DMO"). Interestingly, the decision to establish the DMO position and fill it from outside the organization was made after departure of one of the three superintendents who retired a few weeks after the feedback meetings, but

before our intervention design was agreed upon. We recommended that such an important structural change in mid-stream be deferred. We felt that locking in a structural change in management right at the beginning of the change initiative was pre-mature, especially as values, visions, goals and other important elements of strategic direction had not even been agreed upon. Soon, however, we were glad our advice was ignored. The new DMO turned out to be a very capable change champion possessing both personality and skills well attuned to creating a more open environment in the division. He was also a willing risk taker throughout the change process. It was another good lesson in the important learning that the consultant isn't always right, even when acting on the basis of good organizational theory and experience.

We facilitated four half day meetings with the newly constituted top team. They built foundational agreements about how they would work together as a leadership team. Decision making was a critical area for agreement. For example, what decisions would be made by team consensus and what decision would fall back to the director. Next they built agreement on a statement of core values they, as leaders, aspired to have lived out in the maintenance division. They included brief descriptions of what the values would mean in action. Going to the heart of one of the key feedback themes, they developed agreement on their collective vision for the division's future and created a revised maintenance focused mission statement for the division.

These core tasks accomplished, we coached them next to step back and challenge their own thinking about change. What really was the business case for change? How would they justify, in a brief written case for change, the large expenditure of money, time and pain that would be required to change the maintenance division culture? And what, specifically, were the goals for change they wanted to lead the department toward.

The leadership team felt that the goals they established for the change effort were challenging, simple, yet comprehensive enough to address all of the eight issues themes materially. They agreed that they would lead a change effort to:

1. Align leadership behavior with the vision, mission and core values of the division,
2. Open communication,
3. Improve morale at all levels, and

4. Improve safety performance.

Working through these four crucial top team direction setting meetings, the four leaders developed a new openness and comraderie. They frequently challenged each other's thinking, yet listened to one another respectfully. All of the key work products - values, vision and mission statements, case for change and short list of key change goals - were subject to sometimes vigorous debate, but ultimately were agreed to by consensus of the four. For the first time, the senior leadership of the division was able to speak in one voice about where the division was headed and what was important about how the division was expected to work. Lastly, the team agreed upon their own roles and responsibilities in leading the change effort. While ultimate accountability to sponsor the effort remained with the public works director, much of the day to day change leadership was agreed to rest on the new DMO.

Key Stakeholder Involvement and Kick-off

We believe in "going slow to go fast." It would have been easy to rush out of the leadership team meetings into publication of the values, vision and goals and start on problem solving and skill building projects. However, we wanted to build as much stakeholder support as possible before launching the intervention deeper into the organization. Three critical meetings were scheduled, one handled by the public works director with the county administrator and two handled by us as consultants. The two meetings we handled were with the employees' union business agent (in the local public employees' union the business agent is the key direct representative of the union members vis-à-vis management) and the other with "downtown" – the County Human Resourced Department. Both were believed to be critical players who could either strongly support or significantly obstruct efforts to change the division. Our strategy was to invite early review of the leadership team vision, values, and goals for change in order to develop understanding and support of these key stakeholders before launching the change effort.

The union business agent was the author of the periodic "report card" on various county agencies whose employees were union members. The most recent report card had given the maintenance division the lowest grade in the county, a "D". This had been accompanied with a scathing commentary

charging mistreatment of employees, lack of respect, close minded management and the like. We had established a friendly relationship with the business agent through the process of the assessment, but still approached the meeting to review the leadership team's directional work with some apprehension.

We chose to meet the business agent at the public employees union offices. Early in the conversation he confided that he had been surprised and impressed with the openness and truthfulness of the assessment report. "When I saw that, I knew you guys were straight shooters," he said, again confirming the critical value of objectivity and unvarnished truth telling in organizational change. He was delighted that his input was being sought at an early direction setting stage of the effort – a new experience in his dealings with the county government. He read the top team's statements of values, vision, mission case for change and change effort goals. With evident enthusiasm he said "I'm really surprised. I can get behind that. How can I help?" He then and there volunteered to work on the proposed cross level change management team and he committed to support the efforts represented in what he had read from the leadership team.

Our meeting with the Human Resources Department was also generally positive but more restrained. Four members of the HR department were present, including a departmental lawyer. While there was strong agreement that change was needed in the maintenance division, there was little comment on the substance of the leadership team's work. There was much more discussion of how difficult change would be, binding constraints (of law and policies), scarcity of resources to support the effort and similar cautions. Our request was that someone with authority from HR serve on the change management team. We were not successful in getting a commitment on that point.

The public works director's work with the county administrator and the Board of Supervisors was successful in confirming his mandate to proceed and securing budget approval for a large consulting and training services contract that would last for about a year.

With these key stakeholder interactions in place it was time to launch the effort in the division at large. This time we favored one whole organization meeting with both management and staff present for the same session. The purpose would be for the leadership team to present their collective

decisions on direction, receive feedback, present the plan for change work, and have the employees elect members of the transition management team, or "TMT" as it came to be known.

The concept for the TMT was fairly typical for whole system change efforts (Ault, Walton & Childers, 1998) and is a critical part of the commitment building and collaborative problem solving elements of change. It is an organ for direct employee empowerment in the change process. We recommended, and leadership agreed to, a team of approximately a dozen members representing all levels of the organization from front line labor to senior management. Importantly we wanted to be sure that employees had a majority of the seats compared to management. The function of the TMT was to identify important problems in the division and take action to solve them. In concept the TMT was intended to be a true decision making body with the power to choose for itself what problems to work on and what solutions to implement. Obviously there would be constraints (legal, budget, etc.) but the TMT would be empowered in its charter to act within those constraints, not just make recommendations. We expected that the TMT would be facilitated by the consultants for six months or so during which time it would build strong team bonds and learn important meeting and collaborative problem solving skills to continue on its own, thus also building organizational capability to solve problems.

As expected the launch meeting was noisy and there were several not very respectful challenges to the leaders' presentations as well as to our facilitation. Cynicism, mistrust and posturing were strongly in evidence. The message of "give change a chance" was communicated by some employees, but only with difficulty. The union business agent was a big help here. He spoke very energetically about his hopes for change and willingness to work as a member of the TMT. Reactions from the employees however suggested that there were a significant number of employees who mistrusted the union almost as much as they mistrusted the management! Another important moment in the kick-off meeting was when a senior HR manager from downtown, known to most of the employees only by reputation, showed up at the meeting and spoke briefly in support of change in the division. For most employees in the division this was the first time they had ever seen this person at the division yard. HR was often perceived as a distant powerful force used as an excuse for keeping things as they were. The positive supportive presence of a senior HR official in the kick-off meeting was a noticeable difference compared to past all hands

meetings about division issues. The positive interventions of the union business agent and visibility of HR in the kick-off session were valuable payoffs of the prior stakeholder involvement meetings.

The most significant moment in the meeting came when the crews were asked to enter into private meetings to select their respective representatives to the TMT. (The supervisors also adjourned to elect two of their number to the TMT.) Many of the employees appeared genuinely surprised that they could have a secret ballot process to elect people who would sit with management to engage in problem solving. This was simply not an experience they had had in the division before. We recognized that having the employees elect their own representatives rather than having management chose them was risky. What if we got a TMT consisting of all the hardest most resistant individuals who might act just to frustrate what they thought was another management sponsored initiative? However we felt that transferring important responsibility for change to the employees from the very beginning in a very visible way was essential to begin to build trust and commitment to change and to show an important change in management's behavior at the start. We were very explicit about the risks the employees were taking themselves in choosing their representatives. We also were very explicit in saying neither we nor management would "rescue" the TMT if it could not function. The message we tried to get across was simply that if the employees wanted things to change, they should chose carefully people they thought would work for it in good faith because the TMT was empowered to actually make change happen if they could agree on what to do.

Response during and immediately after the launch meeting was mixed to say the least. Some employees and managers evinced enthusiasm, a spirit of "finally, it sounds like something might happen." Many others were openly derisive or hostile, including a few who dramatically walked out of the TMT election meetings or refused to vote. Overall it was an intensely emotional experience challenging the consultants to retain focus on the big picture and the long effort ahead rather than the drama of the moment.

Launching the TMT

By the end of the kick-off meeting we knew who all the members of the TMT would be except for the seat reserved for HR. We still had not been able to secure agreement from them to provide a senior level member who

could act with authority. Ultimately, the unwillingness of HR to support the TMT process by providing a member to the team with decision making authority severely limited its success because the TMT could not make decisions on a number of matters where HR policies or practices were involved. The public works director took on the task of advocating with HR for a meaningful presence on the TMT, but we did not want to delay while discussion continued; we did not want to lose whatever momentum was established in the all hands kick-off.

The TMT was obviously a "team" in name only to start with. We surmised that there would be a powerful lot of "storming" in getting it going, and we were not wrong about that. In order to accelerate team formation and functioning we scheduled two full day offsite work sessions to develop relationship and seek agreement on a comprehensive team charter. Following the Interaction Associates "Star Team" model, we consider a team charter at its most general level to be an essential set of agreements by the team on:

- Shared and Meaningful Purpose
- Specific and Challenging Goals
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Common and Collaborative Process
- Complimentary Skills

The charter also delineates boundary conditions and constraints. Some employee members bridled at the thought they would have boundaries, but with further discussion the whole team was able to agree upon the reasonableness of important boundaries such as working within legal constraints like the Memorandum of Agreement with the union, county-wide employment policies applicable to all departments, and financial constraints like the existing division budget, existing wages and benefits and so on.

As might be expected, there was complaining about the time commitment of two full days and lots of push back against having to take time to agree upon a detailed charter. "Let's just cut the b--------- and get on with the work" was forcefully expressed. Our introduction of an activity to build a common vision around Purpose and Goals was met with charges of "touchy feely crap" by some. However, in debriefing this important piece of work, there were some startlingly creative and moving statements of individual team members' aspirations. One older gentleman, a slim and wizened 30 year veteran laborer we'll call "Herb" brought a hush to the whole room as he

said, “I’ve worked here for most of my life. I won’t be around here to see the outcome of all of this ‘cause I’m gonna retire soon. But I just want to go out feeling like I’ve done something to make it a better place than I’ve had. I’ll retire happy if I can do that.”

During the chartering sessions we included some basic meeting and listening skills training. Moving on into the TMT work sessions we also conducted frequent just-in-time training modules on basic facilitation, meeting and agenda planning skills and collaborative problem solving (such as the need to agree on root causes of a problem before addressing solutions, etc.)

The work to develop an explicit and detailed charter paid off later on by providing guidelines for what the TMT was supposed to be doing and what was “out of bounds.” In one remarkable example, after several meetings in which one member repeatedly became stuck in advocacy that everything would be solved if they just all got a raise, the union shop steward, a long time laborer widely respected by almost all employees, vigorously said, “Come on, cut that s---- out; pay’s not in our charter! Let’s work on something we can solve!”

Organizational Awareness

The work of Barry Oshrey (Oshrey, 1996) has convincingly shown that there are typical and somewhat predictable dynamics in the relationships and tensions between what he calls the “tops” “middles” and “bottoms” in most organizations. In Oshrey’s terms tops are the senior executive level - the strategy makers and top decision makers. Middles are the middle management, usually responsible for directing those below to carry out the strategy and objectives received from the tops. Bottoms are those whose daily work is counted on to produce the products, services and output, under the management of the middles. Bottoms typically have little power, are supposed to remain task focused and usually have little input into decisions on goals and objectives of the organization.

We elected to utilize Oshrey’s “Organization Workshop” format as an early intervention to provide all members of the division experiential education about basic organizational dynamics. We believed the experience would contribute to “unfreezing” the system if we could help create a commonly shared awareness of the inherent tensions in organizational life. Understanding that predictable role related tensions are inherent in the very

structure of an organization can tend to depersonalize some of the frustration people feel, and thereby hopefully convert at least some anger into understanding and willingness to open to the possibility of change.

In the Organization Workshop (conducted in three sessions of mixed levels) all employees and management participated in a simulated "business" working under pressure to sell and produce services to fictional customers. Everyone took a role as a top, middle, bottom or customer. Roles were set up to assure that in the simulated organization most participants experienced working in a level different from their actual place in the maintenance division. For example, the public works director became a front line production team member. One of the most "troublesome" laborers (he had been fired on charges of employee violence but hired back several years later and was still feared by many for his emotional volatility) drew the card to be the company president. The union business agent took the part of a mid-level manager.

The simulated business has many rules and regulations about work, pay, perks and other facets of organizational life to re-create typical organizational frictions and stresses. Once the simulation begins, the action of the business is stopped several times for facilitated reflections in which each of the three internal groups and the customer are encouraged to talk about what it is like for them in their role and what they are experiencing from the others. This de-briefing produced frequent recognition of realities from the participants' actual work life, often accompanied by peals of laughter and reactions like "that's right" and "you got it!"

Response to this educational experience varied widely. The union business agent was very excited about it, seeing it as a powerful way for people at all levels to gain understanding of what was going on. One mid-level manager refused to participate; a superintendent quite brazenly broke the rules of the game to benefit himself. In the debriefing conversations after sessions of the simulation participants shared observations and there were some insults and shouting matches. We felt the overall impact was positive however, because the simulation generated a great deal of energy and broke some long standing perceptions that people had about one another. For example, the "troublesome" and feared laborer who became "president" in one session was seen to be intelligent and very hard working in supporting the "business."

Problem Solving – Working with the TMT

The work of the TMT proceeded slowly at first. There was a lot of learning and a lot of venting to do. Some of the crews supported their TMT members and provided them with good feedback and ideas about problems to work on. Others dismissed the whole TMT enterprise as "a waste of time," "bulls—t" or worse. There was a fair amount of wrangling between the members of the TMT in early meetings, particularly between one supervisor, who carried a reputation as a very hard driver, and one of the EO's who carried a reputation of being a drug using goof off. Gradually the other members of the TMT learned to intervene in this ongoing conflict themselves by referring to the ground rules, meeting objectives and other guidelines and the need for the consultants to carry all the weight of facilitating the conflict lessened.

From a very long list of possible problems generated in the early round of fact gathering from employees, the TMT narrowed their efforts to a few "hot button" issues, such as when and how employees became eligible to be paid higher pay for temporary service in a higher class work position. "Higher pay for higher class" or HPHC as it was called, was a long standing issue that had generated deep feelings of unfairness. Filling vacancies was another key issue. As vacancies were left open for long periods of time employees felt not only that their chances for advancement were reduced, but that it indicated an intention of management to shrink the division and contract out more and more of the work, threatening basic job security.

Working through these problems presented an opportunity to teach basic group problem solving skills. The concept of building agreement on the definition of the problem and its root causes before proposing solutions was an idea that caught on slowly as it was foreign to a culture which tended to be loud in blaming and quick to argue over pet solutions ideas that often had little relation to root causes.

The members of the TMT experienced a great deal of personal frustration in their roles. On the one hand they were expected by many of their peers to solve big problems and make a lot of change fast, yet they were learning through closer examination of the issues that there was complexity, disagreement about causation, and often confusing or missing data. Having accepted some responsibility to work on change, they were also frustrated

with many of their colleagues who behaved with apparent indifference or hostility to change. TMT meetings were held every other week, with each TMT member reporting back to his or her crew for feedback and response in the alternate weeks.

A challenge for us as consultants was stretching the patience of the TMT members to accept basic training in meeting, facilitation and problem solving skills they desperately needed but sometimes felt they didn't have time for. The absence of authoritative representation from HR on the team was another continuing difficulty. In spite of the public works director's efforts, HR had declined to assign a TMT participant from "downtown" citing workload and resource constraints. Consequently the HR presence on the TMT was in the person of the public works department HR administrative relations officer – basically the department's employee discipline officer. She was a very intelligent and well meaning person to be sure, but most of the employees knew her only as the person who handled their discipline cases and meted out penalties (which frequently led to union grievance actions). More importantly, she did not have the authority to agree to proposals that might require downtown HR blessing, thus putting the TMT into the unwanted position of being a recommending body rather than a decision making body on many of the important policy and process issues that most interested the employees.

In spite of these frustrations and limitations, the TMT experienced some important successes. They did agree on some simple and direct changes to the HPHC process that were implemented in fairly short order. They developed a new employee orientation program that was successfully implemented when the division hired 11 new laborers (much to the relief of everyone) several months into the change effort. They thoroughly analyzed a controversial "flex-staffing" program, gathered facts that rebutted a number of myths that had been floating around about it, and developed some appropriate changes in the program itself and in related training processes.

Having completed this first round of activities, and still under criticism from many employees that they were not doing enough fast enough, the TMT decided to take on some larger issues. They chose to look at the maintenance division safety program (safety training had lapsed to almost none and an employee safety committee created a decade ago had fallen into virtual inactivity), and the extremely high level of disability absence (which put a lot of pressure on the employees who showed up to work). On each of

these large issues the TMT formed a working subgroup called a "problem advisory group" or "PAG." Each PAG created their own short term set of goals and fact finding plan.

The ultimate outcomes of the PAGs remain to be seen. However, the safety subgroup succeeded in re-invigorating the employee safety committee and safety training has been increased. While the worker's compensation/disability group was not able to make any material changes (the system is controlled by various state law mandates and county-wide policies outside control of the public works department) they did obtain a lot of detailed statistical information and educated all employees about the impact of time off on budgets, work load and other concerns shared by the employees. We believe that the generally higher level of knowledge has contributed to a higher level of responsibility in claiming benefits under the system.

The TMT also developed its own rules for rotation of membership and successfully transitioned new members into service on the team as time passed. This served not only to refresh perspectives, but to increase the number of employees who obtained leadership and problem solving skills through the TMT experience. Many of these skills have been taken back and demonstrated within the division work crews as they have begun more successful meeting and planning processes. (See discussion below under crew development.)

As planned, the consultants continued to work with the TMT for about six months. We agreed to extend for another two months. Since we exited, the TMT has continued to work under its own management, meeting generally once a month to work on additional problems and monitor implementation of previously agreed changes. It has reportedly served as a valuable voice of the employee and a training ground for leadership to emerge from the front line employees. There is probably a need to re-examine and update the TMT charter and to clarify the respective charters of the older Employee Committee and the Employee Safety Committee so that the time of employees who serve on these committees is used efficiently and employees understand and see the value of the three bodies as distinct and productive.

Strengthening Leadership in the Middle

The beginning perception that there were serious problems in middle management in the division was strongly borne out in the assessment. Perceptions of "back-stabbing", lack of cooperation, and even basic lack of management competence in some cases, were validated by the data and by the consultants' early interactions with the supervisors and superintendents. All were long time division employees, having come up "through the ranks," but there was a wide range in skills, commitment, and methods of dealing with subordinates. There were deep divisions between the small group of supervisors, some racially based, and some based on past personal histories. There was in fact an "old boy" network among some of the long time managers who had all attended the same high school. Some supervisors were loved by employees and others were mistrusted. Supervisors rarely shared people or equipment from one crew to another. The two things they tended to agree on were that "senior management" was "screwed up" and that the employees weren't "held accountable." They did not seem to want to look at themselves or to examine the role they played in between the other two groups or the impact they were having on "screw ups" or accountability. They seemed to feel completely disempowered to do anything but "hang on" and complain.

The challenge was clear. How could we, as outside consultants, help the supervisors to look at themselves honestly, discuss their own issues openly, and develop some cohesion and direction to become effective middle leadership for the organization? The challenge we saw is very consistent with Barry Oshrey's findings. He suggests that organizations in trouble very often need the most work in strengthening -empowering- the middle so that they can give truth to the tops and support to the bottoms. The middles are the fulcrum for change because they are in the only position to see and interact frequently with both tops and bottoms and in their "middle" position they are constantly pulled by all the stresses and strains of the system.

Working with the middle was also in direct response to the first goal established by the senior team for the change effort – "Align leadership behavior with the values, mission and vision."

We facilitated several tough meetings with the supervisors, the purpose of which were to strengthen their ability to work as colleagues in management rather than continue to behave as competitive individuals. The first meeting

began with much storming and complaining. A lot of it was simply rejecting the process altogether. In the first session we heard a steady chorus of challenges like - "Why are we here? It's the senior managers' fault not ours. Why are we being blamed? We can't do anything. We don't get any respect or support. What is the hidden agenda? Why don't they just tell us what to do? If we could just fire some of the bad apples everything would be fine. That assessment was a pile of crap; it's not that bad. I can't believe how much you guys are getting paid! What a f-----g waste of money." In the midst of such fulminations they did gradually begin to talk about issues and problems they felt were getting in their way, although still asserting that the problems were always caused by others.

Finally, after almost two hours of this foment, one of the supervisors, an older man nearing retirement, said in a very soft voice, "You know guys, I think we have to take some responsibility too. We have to look at ourselves." This didn't break the pattern instantly, as more of the finger pointing talk continued, but within a few minutes someone else picked up the message. "Hey wait, I think Jim was right. We need to look at ourselves some here too." From these small beginnings of awareness rather bravely spoken the meeting moved into a realm of opportunity.

We had written all of the problems and issues that had been vented for two hours on flip chart sheets that adorned virtually the entire room. Now we helped them go back through it all and identify the key themes that emerged. They boiled it all down to 9 or 10 major problem areas. With rough agreement that they had at least named the problems they were most concerned about (most of which, unsurprisingly, mirrored the data and themes from the "crap" assessment) we then urged them to think about some goals for themselves as supervisors. We chose to focus on goals at this stage because we felt it was still too early to try to engage them directly in discussion of their own responsibility and dysfunction. We felt they needed some agreement on direction first.

The rest of the meeting was energetic and positive as the supervisors proposed a list of possible goals, clarified and evaluated their ideas and eventually settled upon five goals they agreed to work for. These goals included greater consistency in the way they managed staff, more teamwork among themselves, getting higher pay, and better communication upwards and downwards. Importantly, they also agreed that they wanted to meet together as a group to present their goals to the public works director and the

division chief, a significant first step in coming together as a management team.

In a subsequent meeting the supervisors continued to open their communication with each other and made progress toward seeing themselves as a management team. In one particularly dramatic moment, they grouped themselves around the room in their various "cliques" and, with some nervous laughter, spoke their suspicions and stories about each other sub-group to sub-group. This experience surfaced some of the racial stereotyping and suspicions that had for so long been undiscussable except in the "cliques."

To prepare for the supervisors' presentation of their goals, we coached the senior team heavily on basic listening skills, particularly paraphrasing and inquiry to check for understanding before challenging. "They don't listen to us" was the most frequent charge supervisors threw upwards. We wanted to be sure not only that the senior team really listened when they met with the supervisors, but that they had the skills to show the supervisors they were hearing what was said. One of the most common causes why people feel they are not heard is simply that they do not get any evidence of being heard. Giving people evidence of being heard starts in the conversation itself.

The supervisors approached the meeting with the senior team with excitement and some apprehension. They were, we felt, quite surprised to find that the senior team, and especially the director of public works, not only listened carefully and heard what they said, but actually stated support for all five of the goals they had set, including trying to get more pay for them as performance of the division improved.

The supervisors' goal of increasing consistency directly addressed a common complaint from employees that impacted employee morale. That complaint was that the supervisors were "discriminatory" in applying policies like safety, tardiness and accident reporting. It was widely believed that supervisors played favorites and some people were punished while infractions of others were ignored out of friendship or racial bonds. While intent to discriminate could not always be ruled out, a lot of the appearance of discrimination seemed to flow from simple inconsistency in how different supervisors applied the policies within their own crews. Shortly after the goals meeting with the senior team, the supervisors began a series of work sessions of their own to review how they interpreted and enforced policies

and procedures in the division to develop consistent approaches they would all use.

The supervisors came to realize they in fact have a great deal of power in the system to influence the culture, performance and the lived experience of the division. There was still a good deal of skepticism and denial, but we felt a spark was ignited to open up to leadership and change through bringing the supervisors together.

Driving Change Through Skills Transfer

Our design for intervention was, as noted above, based on the Direction Commitment and Capability change framework. Working at the senior team level on values, vision, mission, case for change and goals focused on the area of Direction. Communicating that direction to stakeholders and employees through the launch process and continuing communication (for example, the values, vision and goals were posted in every crew meeting room and were repeatedly stressed in verbal and written communications) attempted to keep the Direction clear to all through the difficult process of working through change. Empowering employees to solve real problems they cared about through the TMT and empowering supervisors to develop and advocate their own set of goals and needs with the senior team helped to foster Capability, but even more importantly was intended to help build Commitment to and ownership of the change in multiple parts of the organization.

To drive change deeper and make it last however, employees throughout the division needed new skills and practices for working together differently. History and the assessment showed there was a dearth of skills in teamwork, communication, collaborative problem solving, planning, feedback and conflict resolution. Lacking these important capabilities for successfully working together, the organization tended to fall back on modes that created a culture of disrespect and dependency – waiting for orders, one way (top down) communication, a penchant for quick fixes, unresolved conflicts, finger pointing, political maneuvering. We saw a need to deliver fundamental teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills to overcome these endemic problems.

Fortunately, the senior leadership supported these ideas wholeheartedly. They joined in the learning process themselves rather than operating with the

assumption that skills training was only for others farther down the hierarchy. The senior leadership team's openness to skills training showed up not only in willingness to pay for it, but early on when we spent several hours practicing basic listening skills with them before the meeting on goals with the supervisors. They very seriously engaged the practices, especially trying to balance inquiry and advocacy, and continued afterwards to coach each other openly in practicing active listening and inquiry in our subsequent working sessions.

As described above, we brought skills training on a just-in-time basis into TMT and supervisor work sessions, teaching things like how to write results focused outcome statements for every meeting, detailed agenda planning, building agreement on ground rules, facilitative interventions to keep a meeting on track, problem solving tools, and consensus building. But this was clearly not enough due to the limited number of people in these sessions (10 supervisors and 12 TMT members vs. nearly 100 in the whole division.) Thus, our plan called for interactive workshops training for everyone in the division.

The "tops" and "middles" – senior team, superintendents and supervisors – together attended a customized version of Interaction Associates' *Facilitative Leadership* ® workshop. This was a three day session in which the participants learned elements of teamwork, balancing results, process and relationship, leading and planning meetings, coaching others, creating and communicating a vision, feedback skills (both giving and receiving), and the dynamics of the ladder of inference (Argyris 1990, Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994). The workshop also acted as a forum for continued open dialogue between the middle management and the senior team about what was going on, how they were or were not changing, and developing awareness of personal style differences. Even as supervisors remained critical of the senior team and the director in particular, they were impressed with the openness and participation they saw from above. Sharing the *Facilitative Leadership*® workshop experience with the senior team helped somewhat to overcome the superintendents' perception that they were being blamed for the division's problems.

The biggest training challenge however was bringing team training (Interaction Associates' *Teams in Action*® workshop) to all of the crews. An important planning question was whether or not the supervisors should attend the workshops with their crews. There were pros and cons both ways.

But before we had made a final recommendation, the supervisors, in a show of solidarity, told the director they would not attend the crews' workshops. They felt the workshops would end up as a forum for them to be "bashed" by the employees and they wanted no part of it. Happy that the supervisors had taken a stand (whether the right one or not), and reflecting on the obvious supposition that the crews would feel more free to speak their minds if their supervisors were not present, we proceeded to schedule the crews' workshops without the supervisors.

Teams in Action ® is a two day workshop covering fundamental elements of teamwork such as the importance of shared purpose and goals, clear roles and responsibilities, and skills for interpersonal communication, feedback, conflict resolution and problem solving. We anticipated that the parts of the workshop focused on team structure would be less important than the basic interpersonal skills of team members working together. We were right about that.

The first morning of the first workshop started off with a bang as many if not most of the employees may have felt like "prisoners." Mr. Hatcher stepped to the front of the room to open the workshop. "Jessie", a very large laborer seated in the front of the room, bellowed out "Who the f--- are you and what the f--- are you doin' here?" Mr. Hatcher was not blown away by this aggressive testing but rather gently and humorously entered into inquiry about "Jessie's" concerns. This led in a short time to Jessie smiling and admitting that "I just wanted to check you out first."

The standard agenda for the workshop was quickly abandoned and each of the four two day sessions took a path of its own. Most of the time was spent on communication and feedback issues, and on teaching and practicing rudiments of conflict resolution. In several sessions some crew members refused to come the first day, but by the end of the first day, their crew mates were reporting a positive experience and most of the holdouts showed up for the second day.

The biggest issue that arose consistently in the *Teams in Action* workshops was the absence of the supervisors. "Why aren't they here getting the same stuff we're getting?" was asked over and over. While creation of an open environment for discussion free of concern about reprisal from supervisors was appreciated, the crews were adamant that the supervisors be taught the

same things they were learning, a telling back handed appreciation for the learning.

The *Teams in Action* workshop created a safe forum for crewmates to have some of the most frank and honest conversations they had ever had with one another. We will never forget one feedback session in which two men told one of their crewmates, with elegantly specific fact based feedback, how his uncleanliness, body odor and sloppy personal habits affected them on the job. The next day the individual showed up showered, shaved and wearing clean clothes and shoes. His dramatic one day makeover was openly celebrated by his co-workers.

The opening of honest conversation and feedback begun in the *Teams in Action* workshop seemed to build some traction for more rapid change. We therefore decided to act quickly on the demand that "the supervisors get the same stuff." We designed a half day review session for the supervisors to experience in summary fashion what had been covered in the *Teams in Action* sessions. But more importantly we recommended and, with difficulty, the supervisors agreed, to conduct facilitated crew and supervisor feedback meetings so that they could all practice what they had learned about feedback within the safety of a consultant facilitated meeting. Response of the supervisors was varied. Some openly dreaded the prospect of receiving feedback from their crews; others quite genuinely said they would welcome learning what their crews thought about them.

To enable the crews and supervisors to have a productive conversation we created a tightly structured meeting agenda for one half day sessions. It has been observed many times that difficult conversation needs to be well organized rather than "free flowing." We used the Interaction Associates' "strategic moment" model as the design principle for the meeting:

Insert circle arrow circle

After building quick agreement on ground rules, we facilitated "plus/delta" conversation on the "current state", i.e. listing of "what's working" about how the crew and supervisor work together followed by listing of "what changes should be made." We then facilitated a discussion to build

agreement, as a team, on a future vision of success for the team as a desired future state.

While there was typically a wide range of views on the current state, it was surprisingly easy for the crews and their supervisors to reach a broad consensus on vision for the desirable future state in answer to the simple questions: What would you want it to be like working together a year from now? What would it be like a year from now if you enjoyed working together? The visions that the crews came up with were heartfelt, practical, and hopeful, focused on things like being able to trust one another, open communication, safety, opportunity for advancement and having fun at work.

The third part of the feedback meeting agenda was the arrow of the model – how to get there. Each crew brainstormed ideas for actions to move toward their vision and then built agreement on 3 to 4 first action items to move forward. Some of these action items were more general – continue to give each other fact based feedback – and others were more specific – three of us will go meet with the division chief in the next two weeks to talk about equipment maintenance problems we've had.

In de-briefing the feedback sessions with the supervisors afterwards, most expressed appreciation for having been able to receive feedback from their crews and felt "it wasn't that bad after all."

Visible Changes in Management Practices

To drive change through a whole system it is well recognized that some highly visible "quick wins" need to be achieved. The TMT provided a few of these though not as many in a short time as employees seemed to hope for. Two significant management changes driven by the leadership had important impacts however.

One was the institution, shortly after completion of the *Facilitative Leadership* workshops, of bi-weekly work planning meetings for all crews. Management of day-to-day work in the past had been up to each individual supervisor's style, but the pre-dominant approach was a morning crew muster in which the supervisor just told the crew what they would be doing that day. The supervisors had lists of tasks to be done (generated by citizen requests, the engineering department plans and management's long term

maintenance plans) but the employees rarely had sight into the big picture. With the daily muster the crews only got the day to day "orders" and knew nothing about what the morrow would bring, let alone the next week. In addition to telling the employees each day what they were to do, many of the supervisors also gave very explicit orders about who would do what and exactly how they would do it. Micro-management was commonplace.

The vision for a new management approach was that the crews and supervisors would plan two weeks of work at a time, together. Supervisors would lay out the work required over the two week span and invite input from the employees not only on scheduling, but staffing and execution of the work. Several of the supervisors were strongly opposed to such planning, saying it was a waste of time or that they knew better than the employees how to do it. After all, that's why we have supervisors! Clearly some of these feared loss of authority and control if they invited employees into planning as opposed to just telling them what to do.

Senior leadership was adamant however, that the more inclusive planning approach to managing the work be put into place. Some supervisors organized and led the bi-weekly planning meetings very openly; others continued resisting the process, some acting in bare compliance, others even not holding the meetings. While implementation was thus spotty at first, the change was very noticeable and the process gradually took hold throughout most of the crews. Some of the supervisors began to talk about the good ideas they were getting from employees and they found that the forward planning helped them to avoid staffing problems when employees had a doctor's appointment or PTO or other anticipated work absences. When the employees got work assignments piecemeal on a daily basis they had little reason to reveal known future absences, but when planning together with their crewmates over a two week time span they were much more willing to volunteer their own personal schedule conflicts so that absences could be planned around rather than be a surprising cause for emergencies.

The employees found they had a voice in the planning of the work; a forum to offer their own experience and ideas about organizing what needed to be done. And they saw the behavior of their immediate supervisors changing. It was actually possible to have meetings that resulted in discussion and action rather than just a one way order giving!

A second “quick win” came somewhat later which also demonstrated a major change in management behavior. About five years before the change effort was started, the division chief decided to rotate the supervisors and teams. This decision was made to try to work around some serious conflicts between specific crews and their supervisors. All supervisors were moved from the crews they had led to a different crew. In some cases this meant becoming supervisor of a crew in a different yard as well. The new assignments were decided on and announced by the division chief without input from the crews or the supervisors. Announcement of this “rotation” created something of a firestorm in response. Supervisors were angry; crews were unhappy. To assuage some of the anger over the changes, the division chief agreed that within a few years another rotation would occur so supervisors and crews wouldn’t feel they were “stuck” with the new arrangement permanently.

The deep dissatisfaction of many with the rotation decision was still talked about when we started working with the division almost five years after it had happened. The “rotation” was often mentioned as an example of “management doesn’t know what they’re doing” or “management doesn’t trust us.” It was also believed by many (with some accuracy it seemed) that the rotation decision was simply a way of sweeping some critical crew or supervisor performance problems under the rug.

During the course of our work in the division, the division chief concluded that he had to fulfill his promise, made when the rotation was done, to make another rotation. In addition to keeping the promise, he simply felt that a rotation of supervisors would be good for the organization in the context of changing supervisor roles and behaviors.

This time however, he made an important change in how the decision would be made. Rather than decide the rotation himself, he informed the supervisors that it was time, but delegated to them to decide who would move where. Thus the supervisors had to work together to figure out the rotation scheme. While some were not happy with having to rotate at all, they were given collective ownership of how it would be done. Over a period of several weeks the supervisors worked out a rotation plan they could all support and brought it back to the division chief and deputy director and it was adopted by them with only minor adjustment..

Delegating the rotation plan decision making to the supervisors as key stakeholders, and ultimate acceptance of their plan, was a very visible change in behavior of senior management compared to the first rotation decision. The result was both greater acceptance of the plan and grudging acknowledgment that senior management was changing as well.

Results of the Change Effort

An organizational change effort like that undertaken in the Maintenance Division represents a huge investment for an organization – in time, energy, and money. Achieving a real return on that investment is obviously critically important for all concerned. After our exit from the organization, we wanted to find out from participants in the effort what they thought about the results of the effort. In pursuit of this goal we conducted an additional series of interviews over a period of six months with division employees at multiple levels. We again interviewed the senior management team members (the division chief had been replaced), several supervisors, a sample of represented employees and the union business agent.

As expected, our post intervention data gathering revealed a variety of perspectives, yet a coherent picture of significant change emerged. Major changes in work processes, and some structural changes made during the course of the intervention and after were resulting in improved communication and more effective planning. For example, the former superintendent roles have been changed so that they provide direct support to the Operations Manager focusing on implementation and operational integrity of the Maintenance Management System, quality of the division's work product and planning for long term resource and equipment supply. The superintendents no longer have direct line supervision of the supervisors. The supervisors have been delegated more responsibility for the day to day management of the work and through the leadership and team development training provided in the change initiative they have learned more effective problem solving, communication and feedback skills to manage themselves and their crews. Lines of communication are more clear and the supervisors tend to work together more cohesively as a middle management team instead of playing one against the other.

In addition to these structural changes, increased interpersonal skills have opened communication, increased trust and reduced conflict. People said "The workers' trust in management has been re-established" and "The atmosphere here is now much more open."

These changes in turn are producing enhanced performance of the organization in service of the vision and strategic goals established by the leadership team. As one person said "They're getting more work done now with less supervision, with fewer superintendents and no plans to replace them."

More specific observations of the results follow.

More open communication and system feedback

Improving the abilities of employees to communicate effectively and open the system to constructive feedback is essential to building collaborative capability. There seems to be general agreement that more and better communication is happening throughout the division now. For example, interviewees reported that:

- A veteran employee said "we've learned how to talk about issues in a practical and constructive way without being completely emotional about things. We've learned how to solve problems by talking to each other."
- The power of the rumor mill has been reduced. People are much more likely now to go ask questions about things they hear and challenge rumors ("Where did you get that information from?" etc.) rather than just accept the rumors and pass them on. "Trust is starting to rear its head."
- Employees feel they are getting more information from management. The management team is seen as being better prepared for meetings. Group communication now typically has structured agendas and meetings stick to reasonable time frames.
- The supervisors are communicating amongst themselves much more and sharing resources (people and equipment) in ways they never did before. They have continued their efforts to promote consistent application of policy and equal treatment of employees regardless of which crew they are on.

- The system has opened up to more feedback increasing understanding between management and the employees. "Our senior leadership I believe is more aware of how the employees view them and vice versa." A dramatic example of feedback cited by a manager was when two employees organized a protest meeting over a County Administrator's decision that supervisors would no longer be eligible for overtime pay. This was a particularly hot issue that came up after we had exited. The manager reported that even though there was a lot of anger over the announcement, the meeting was "a great meeting – one of the best we've ever had" as the employee organizers had put together a tight agenda, set ground rules and facilitated the discussion productively so that everyone could be heard.
- While there are still some employees viewed as "naysayers" or "negative" the power of their negative messages has been reduced. The existence of a known regular process for taking employee feedback on the work (using the "plus/delta" evaluation process) provides a forum on a daily or weekly basis for letting "steam" out of the employees whose former negativity frequently boiled over into confrontational behavior. Of one of the employees who was previously considered a "worst case" it was said that he "now comes up with wonderful ideas vs. just objections. His focus now is to make things better, not just to get even."

Increasing trust in management; reduced conflict

- One employee observed "A survey (now) would find it's no longer 74% that don't trust management. My educated guess, from union meetings, is it's less than 20%. Their trust is with the immediate supervisors." Another observed "Now, it's no longer them against us; it's just us"
- "There's a spirit of collaboration now. There's no reason not to collaborate. Top to bottom is learning to do business in a different way."
- Managers report less of their time has to be spent on resolving conflicts as employees are working out more interpersonal conflicts between themselves through feedback and problem solving on the spot.
- There is more regular problem solving communication between management and the Union. There is more trust between the Union and management and more effort to collaborate on resolving issues before they reach a confrontational stage. Consequently disciplinary

actions and grievances are less frequent and the cost of conflict management has been reduced. Management and the Union have opened constructive dialogue on issues such as perceived abuse of sick leave and reducing the amount of disability absence.

- "Supervisors treat employees with dignity and respect which wasn't there before. The vast majority is now happy in the workplace. This was not the case before."

Employee involvement in work planning and evaluation

- Whereas previously the management of supervisors was divisive and the superintendents sometimes acted rather like puppeteers pulling their strings, now the Operations Manager facilitates a weekly meeting of the supervisors in which they review and solve work related issues, plan future activities and share information of mutual interest. The culture and tenor of supervisors' interactions is significantly improved.
- The bi-weekly crew planning sessions have developed into more or less standard operating procedure resulting in both more effective utilization of resources and greater satisfaction for employees who feel they have a voice in how the work gets done. One of the supervisors who was most resistant to involving his crew in decision making made a big turn around and became very enthusiastic about having his crew do a frequent "plus/delta" review of their own work as a way to improve efficiency and quality and improve overall performance.

Implementation of the Maintenance Management System

Implementation of new technical systems such as a maintenance management system always impacts the social systems and human behavioral dynamics of an organization. It is never just "technical." Recognition of this fact of organizational life, and supporting technological change through effective social and human behavioral change is a responsibility of change leadership.

- Opposition to the idea of installing a maintenance management system ("MMS") is much reduced. Many employees are now actively involved in gathering and inputting the necessary data to operate the system. Successful utilization of a computerized maintenance management system is viewed by management as essential to enable

the Division to compete for additional work outside of the County owned facilities – thus protecting employee's jobs and allowing possible growth of the Division.

- One of the former supervisors who was very strong on productivity but not very strong on managing interpersonal relationships has been promoted to the role of managing the quality of input to the MMS. Thoughtfulness and accuracy of data entry are critical to success of the MMS as a management tool. For example, throughout the year there are significant cyclical and seasonal variations in the nature and quantity of work that division does, so accurate quantification of production is required over time to capture the real picture of the work. The promotion of this individual represents a case of "the right man in the right job" to support technical change.
- Using the data in the MMS is enabling the Division to define and focus on quality of work as well as quantity. Training in using the MMS has resulted in increased job skills and sense of responsibility for many employees.

Increased system wide efficiencies

- As mentioned above, there have been important structural changes in management of the Division. Before the change effort there were nine supervisors and three superintendents in hierarchical line of command, plus a logistics support function (two FTEs) for the superintendents. Now there are no superintendents; one former superintendent and one promoted supervisor hold the roles of Assistants to the Operations Manager. Supervisors now report directly to the Operations Manager, who as noted above tends more toward facilitation of the supervisors as a middle management team than toward directing them through hierarchical authority. One of the Assistants to the Operations Manager has the responsibility for cost effective equipment and materials acquisition to provide what the supervisors need for their crews. The other has the responsibility to assure accurate and effective implementation of operation of the MMS. Several supervisors have retired, opening upward mobility from below. When the former "administrative relations" staff person left, it was not necessary to replace her because the burden of frequent disciplinary and conflict management tasks that had been her

responsibility was significantly reduced. The Union business agent estimates that the division has saved over $1,000,000 in management costs since the beginning of the intervention as a result of reducing and re-defining the management roles and making those roles more effectively linked to performance.

- Although the available record keeping systems are not able to produce hard data to confirm it, management and other employees believe that absenteeism for sick leave and injury claims has declined. The length and number of workers compensation claims have declined as employees have gained a better understanding of the impact of workers comp costs on the system and they have reduced the use of workers comp absence as a form of protest against working conditions.
- Because of better work planning in the bi-weekly crew meetings, on-going process improvement through frequent crew "plus/deltas" and installation of the MMS, the work is more efficient. The division is now doing more work without significantly more people.

Reinvigoration of safety culture

- The employee safety committee that existed for years within the Division had fallen into ineffectiveness prior to the change effort. It met rarely, many "members" did not attend, and it didn't do much that employees recognized as valuable. Building on the model of the TMT and the meeting and collaboration skills learned through the change effort, the Safety Committee has taken on a new life. Safety training and awareness have been given a new importance in the Division and employees have again come to see the Safety Committee as an important part of the organization and safety as an important job function for everyone.

Personnel changes

When embarking on significant organizational change leadership must be aware that there will be changes in personnel along the way. The organization will lose some people and others will need to be moved into different roles and responsibilities. Significant personnel changes have occurred in the Division through the change process.

- The original division chief rotated on to another position within the Public Works Department.
- Two of the three original superintendents retired and the one remaining had his responsibilities very largely changed.
- One supervisor was moved to a role that better fit his capabilities to support the MMS implementation.
- Two new supervisors were appointed.
- At least two of the most "troublesome" employees were terminated or simply quit.
- Significantly, when it came time to fill vacant supervisor positions, senior leadership choose to establish an employee team to conduct interviews for candidates and make recommendations. Naturally the senior leaders retained the decision authority for the promotion, but they honestly solicited and used the input from the employee interview team. In one case the person appointed was the one recommended by the team. Even though he was perceived by the team to be less technically knowledgeable than some other candidates, he was the one they felt had the greatest interpersonal skills and respect from the employees.
- The new supervisors appointed to replace the retirees are people who took an active and supportive role in the change effort and are generally respected and trusted in the organization. For the first time in its history, the division has a female supervisor. These promotions are creating a more civil and communicative working relationship among the supervisors which in turn results in greater productivity.

These are all important positive changes, and there is a long way to go. One senior manager observed "the seeds have been planted and they will grow." One of the employees interviewed in the results survey said simply, "It didn't work before, but this will last." The challenges of continuing that growth, and the possible rewards, were summarized by the Director of Public Works when he said:

> "I was looking for a fundamental shift in thinking to get people to see they are the problem and they are the solution to show how good the Division is, to show the quality and quantity of the work we can do. We're seeing that shift. This year and next year is when we are going to be able to teach our employees what quality means in our work.

> Now they are ready. We still have a lot of work to do. The managers are beginning to realize that for us to produce real quality they have to let go of some of their control and the employees are beginning to realize that for the managers to let go of control the employees have to step up to responsibility."

As consultants we were delighted to hear participants in the process speak of these changes and to see the leadership of the organization strengthen their commitment to continuing change. And that leadership was not only at the "top," but emerged throughout the organization when encouraged by the spirit and skills of collaboration.

Recall the first meeting of the TMT, the off-site "launch" meeting, in which, Herb spoke of his personal vision for working on the TMT – "I just want to leave this place better than it is now." Unfortunately Herb suffered an on the job injury and was out of work for almost a year so was not able to actually serve on the TMT. However Herb didn't retire but returned to work when he was healed and in his own quiet unassuming way spoke out time and again for openness and change. Herb's positive and collaborative leadership contributed to the employee interview team recommending his promotion to supervisor. Now Herb will end his career in the division from the role of supervisor and as such, building on the change he and his co-workers have begun, have a real opportunity to realize his own vision for leaving things better.

Donn C. Hatcher was a senior partner with Interaction Associates and co-lead consultant during the intervention described in this article. Mr. Hatcher is now an independent consultant with offices in Pleasant Hill, CA. He can be reached at Donn Hatcher and Associates 925-933-1904 or at d.hatcher@earthlink.net.

Jamie O. Harris is a senior consultant at Interaction Associates, Inc., a 36 year old consulting and learning company with offices in Cambridge, MA and San Francisco, CA. Mr. Harris was the initiating lead consultant on the project described in this paper. Contact him at 415-343-2617 or at jharris@interactionassociates.com.

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