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### **Organizational Development Thesis Project**

**Operation's Department**

#### **Staff Assessment and Departmental Analysis**

The experience of organizational assessment taught me several things about conflict management and its principles. First, it taught me the importance of building trust in order to be able to “go below the line” in seeking information from leadership and their employees. Though I had the advantage of already knowing my participants in a way that accelerated the assessment, I reflected often on the amount of time it might take to build rapport with employees in a low-trust work environment. A consultant would need to be very intentional and careful in both asking questions and observing behavior. Most importantly, I realized it was extremely important not to appear aligned with leadership but not to criticize them either. Being the impartial party proved to be especially challenging. In reality, trust that would elicit important information would take many months for a consultant not already part of a culture.

Second, I learned the importance of open-ended questions and flexibility in the interview process. Though never having prepared an assessment interview before, the questions I chose worked well in getting the information needed because they did not limit the participants. However, I also quickly

learned to spot redundancy in my questions and to avoid over-taxing my participants by covering familiar emotional ground. I learned to be flexible in asking follow-up questions to make sure that I had heard and understood the participants correctly. Instinctively, the phrases “Is that what you are trying to say?” or “Tell me more about that...” became a regular part of the process. Often, participants had trouble articulating their thoughts, and my repeating back allowed real clarity.

Third, I learned the importance of assessing my own emotional reactions and bias. In meetings with leadership, I often found my own emotions and insecurities triggered by either the certainty of leadership of how to proceed (despite my recommendations) or need from leadership for certainty of outcome (which I could not guarantee). I had to evaluate my reactions after each encounter to extract my own emotions. Then I could contemplate what was motivating the leadership.

In compiling the final data to present to leadership, I was often hit with the gravity of presenting the true outcome rather than my own bias. Though the final results pointed overwhelmingly to the dysfunction that I had observed, I still had to be conscious of my desire to filter positive and only present negative in order to “prove my case”. Thus, I learned an important lesson of emotional awareness around trying to control the situation and to simply let the data speak for itself, whether positive or negative.

Finally, I learned the importance of confidentiality and setting expectations. By the end of the assessment, it became much harder to censor myself when talking with employees. I had a lot of inside, personal information and had to make a concerted effort not to accidentally break anyone's confidentiality by sharing something told to me in an interview or by leadership. I realized through the process that confidentiality is so incredibly important, especially in an environment where trust is low. Breaking confidentiality could undue all the hard work of building relationships. Yet, emotionally, it becomes a lot to hold in and process alone. In the future, I will be more prepared to experience that emotional burden.

Setting expectations with employees and leadership was also an important part of the process. I believe organizational development work most likely appeals to those who enjoy solving problems and helping others. It is easy to see the solution and want to implement it. Yet leadership in an organization is ultimately responsible for implementing a cultural change. It is a natural part of the process for employees to start looking to you, the consultant, for the outcome. But the consultant only has as much influence as leadership will allow.

Systemically, I found Edwin Friedman's work on family systems to be a constant guide in this process. The concepts of the identified patient, homeostasis, and self-differentiation were prevalent and identifiable in the

process. The concepts helped guide me in the deeper emotional motivations working within the greater system. His identification of emotional dysfunction made it much easier to imagine what needed to be changed to move toward a functional system. The concept of trust as outlined in Likert, Covey and Lencioni's work kept my focus on relationships first. Without working relationships, none of the discussions on organizational processes, efficiency or stream-lining were meaningful. I could see none of that was achievable without strong relationships or effective communication. The simple act of knowing someone, being curious about them is a very powerful tool. And it is deceptively simple.

What I learned from this experience will help me in training, facilitating, and organizational development work in the future. I will be able to anticipate the emotional complexities of the work. More importantly, it gives me hope that even the most complex of organizational problems is solvable. Whether those involved embrace the solution is a completely separate issue. But by working the process of systemic analysis, by paying attention to the emotional clues, and by taking the time to get to know the people involved, it is possible to offer an organization or a department the hope of a new beginning in the midst of discouragement. That is a very meaningful experience.