## TURNING THE LOCAL
# GOVERNMENT SHIP
# STARBOARD

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## SIX KEYS TO ACTIVATING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CHANGE

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**T**oday's managers have the exciting opportunity to create more effective and highly valued local governments than ever before. To do so will take more than working harder and smarter. In most cases, it will require local governments to generate true organizational culture change.

I know, even the term is scary, and the suggestion of the need for culture change is often met with a mix of cynicism and frustration. That's an honest reaction for many in local government who may feel under attack after years of devoting their best efforts to the toughest issues facing their communities in a generation.

Yet despite these efforts, disconnects persist between residents' negative perceptions of government and the positive things government *actually* does to improve their daily lives. This is a culture war of another kind. Thus far, the culture of local government has proven to be no match for the culture (or set of behaviors and beliefs among people) *toward* government in general.

Especially in large government organizations, culture change often evokes the "turning of the ship" analogy, which, of course, speaks to the difficultly and the time it takes to turn something so large with such momentum that it is easier to just stay the course.

Most managers are quick to tackle and to fix what they readily identify as performance issues, like absenteeism and missed deadlines. These are often symptoms of such larger problems signaling the need for culture change as lack of cooperation, purpose, and communication, as well as general organizational stagnation.

The later are both easier to ignore and harder to fix. And like the iceberg, it's hard for managers to understand the dangers of, no less fix, what they do not see, including shared values, beliefs, and commitments that drive organizational effectiveness and performance.

So, instead of turning the ship, managers engage in endless retooling and restructuring efforts or focus on just plain fixing the next biggest problem that arises—in other words, rearranging the deck chairs. The truth in this analogy is that culture change is hard, but the only thing more urgent than the desperate need for organizational culture change in most local governments is the time frame the manager has to make it happen.

Unlike the captain who can simply yell, "Turn to the starboard," the work of the local government manager takes more than a single command. Although specific changes will be unique to each locality,

managers must rely on six keys to activate organization-wide culture change.

### 1 Support of the elected body.
Managers know the support of the elected body is critical to the success of most anything we do. Notwithstanding important boundaries in the council-manager structure of government, some managers may be too quick to draw a red line between what they see as management and organizational issues versus policy and political issues. If the manager pigeonholes organizational culture change as solely a management or organizational issue, the effort may be doomed from the start.

The elected body must fully understand the reasons for the change and have clear expectations about what it will see as a result of the change (refer to local government management rule No.1: No surprises!). Elected officials must engage in and endorse this effort as it will impact everything: how the organization thinks, acts, communicates, and is perceived. Specifically, prior to the launch and implementation of the culture change, the elected body should adopt specific tenants of the culture change in its vision statement and goal-setting processes. An ideal time to do this is at an annual commission retreat.

Commissions rarely have time away from the full agenda of a commission meeting to get in the balcony and think about the broader vision. Doing so affords elected officials the opportunity to see how the culture change aligns with their vision.

When elected officials see the benefits of influencing the organization at this level, they will also see less of a need to dive deeper into the organization to try to fix problems when they arise.

While some elected officials may not want to embrace the term *culture change* when they first hear it, they will become champions of the change when they realize that you have armed them with something much more powerful: Confidence in the organization they represent and the ability to easily convey that to their constituents.

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### 2 The power of employee buy-in.
Make no mistake about it, employees make culture change happen, so employee buy-in is essential. For employees, buying in to culture change is not like the passive acceptance of a new idea or even the faithful execution of a new direction. These are easy for most employees.

Buying in to culture change requires a commitment to do things differently than employees have perhaps ever done them before. That's a tall order, especially for something that can seem intangible or unproven like culture change.

It is imperative that employees believe the culture change is not an exercise or process improvement that they are subject to, but a transformational process that they drive. For public employees who have had plenty of justification to feel like an easy target for too long, it is important that the culture change be empowering.

In fact, much of the positive culture change that can occur in local government acknowledges the larger economic and political factors that we do not control but focuses on that which we have complete control over. This is what powerful organizations do.

Employees must also understand that culture change is not only critical for the organization in adapting to new realities, but also that it will help them and their fellow employees perform their jobs better and derive greater job satisfaction.

### 3 Creating and supporting culture change.
Part of my reason for writing this article was my own failed attempts to find a step-by-step process for creating and sustaining the culture change my organization needed. Despite the abundance of literature available on organizational culture, I could find little with a strong nexus or much practical application to local government organizations.

I ultimately came to realize, however, that the lack of a single best process for effectuating organizational culture change is not as important as developing a process you believe will work best for your organization—and then using it. The process of stimulating culture change generally involves identifying what the current culture is and what the preferred culture needs to be.

This effort takes willingness to dig deep and identify what collective behavior changes need to occur for employees and residents to derive continuously improving meaning from the organization, to the benefit of the organization. This requires the ability to take an honest look in the mirror and recognize what the organization does well, what it does not do well, and where it must improve. Your evaluation must consider perceptions of the organization as facts.

This sounds easy, but it is extremely hard to do. It opens the door, however, to an enormous opportunity for the manager to explore with employees the reasons these perceptions exist, to empower employees to fix problems and to challenge them to actively convey the importance of what they do.

Once you have identified the most important culture changes to make, it will be important to identify subsequent steps to integrate the preferred culture in all of the organization's strategic

processes. In human resource processes alone, for example, the organization's culture should be reflected in everything from considering the cultural fit during employee selection, to telling the story of the culture change to retired employees.

The same emphasis on culture must be reflected in how the organization sets priorities and budgets, delivers services, measures performance, communicates, and so forth. Ensuring that all of this actually happens, however, is perhaps the most critical element to change.

This requires creating a structure to support and sustain the organizational culture. This structure clearly articulates the organization's culture and how it is aligned with and reflected in everything the organization does. Leon County does this through what we call Leon LEADS: A Structure for Success (www.LeonCountyFL.gov/LeonLEADS). In spirit, this structure ensures that no detail is too small to escape the culture in all that we do.

## 4 The importance of one culture.
One of the unique characteristics of local governments is that they do not provide one type of product or service, but many. As such, there are numerous divisions and departments from Airports to Zoos that do many different things.

Without a well-articulated organizational culture and a structure to sustain it, all of these separate functional areas have their own cultures. That's the way organizational cultures work. Some cultures happen by accident, others happen by design, but all organizations have them.

As a result, all of the individual organizational cultures may be conveying entirely different and even conflicting things to residents about the larger local government. Here's a signal: You know you have an organizational culture problem when residents say, "I love city parks and recreation, but I hate city government," or "I am a strong advocate of the county library system, but I am not a fan of county government." Huh?

Multiple and competing cultures in one organization create confusion, inconsistency, and loss of the immense opportunity local governments have to convey and reinforce their organizational culture, given the aggregation of ways that managers touch the lives of the people they serve every day. Some departments or divisions will have good, scalable cultural traits that you may adopt in setting the overall culture change.

Managers, however, should know from the start that these individual cultures act as a brake on the innovation and change associated with their efforts to create the one preferred organizational culture for the whole.

## 5 Living your culture through core practices.
Given all of the vastly different functions local governments provide and the importance of creating one organizational culture, core practices are an important way to ensure a distinct and consistent culture throughout the organization. Core practices are not core values. Most organizations have core values; fewer organizations have core practices, which put value statements in action.

The development of core practices is a key element in organizational culture change. Core practices are not ideals that the organization aspires to, but what the people of the organization believe in and what they actually do in living their culture.

As such, core practices should facilitate, carry out, or reinforce specific areas that you identify for the culture change you seek to realize. Core practices define the organization's culture because *we are what we repeatedly do.*

An important detail to consider is to incorporate core practices in employee performance evaluations. Most organizations evaluate employees on the extent to which they "meet expectations" in the performance of technical, professional, and routine aspects of their jobs. Evaluating employees on the extent to which they exemplify the organization's core practices is a key to effectuating and sustaining your culture.

## 6 Manager as culture cheerleader-in-chief.
As I stated earlier, the manager's work in "turning the ship around" is more difficult than the captain who can simply yell a single command. In fact, at the risk of mixing metaphors, the skills and abilities the manager needs in organizational culture change are more like that of a cheerleader.

Like cheerleading, it will require enormous energy, excitement, and repetition by the manager in articulating the preferred culture and the core practices to sustain it. All eyes will be on the manager throughout this cultural transformation. The expectation should be that the crowd (your employees) will adopt a level of acceptance and enthusiasm for the new culture that's slightly lower than the manager and management team (middle management in particular).

This requires the understanding going into it that local government employees are a particularly tough crowd; a bunker mentality commonly exists. The sense that "this too shall pass" is pervasive and understandable given election cycles and high turnover at the top manager position.

Managers should anticipate resistance, especially in siloed departments. This can depend on the organization, but it could be a highly technical department like management information services, or it could be a department with perhaps a long-tenured manager with a high degree of expertise.

Ultimately, it takes more than continuous encouragement. It requires the regular sight of the manager from the most dangerous point at the top of the local government pyramid in order to inspire others to follow.

If managers are willing to embrace this time of great adversity as an exciting opportunity to effectuate organizational culture change, their organizations will be poised to enjoy the far-reaching impact of that transformation. **PM**

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