

Focus on Process:

Key to Successful Service Change

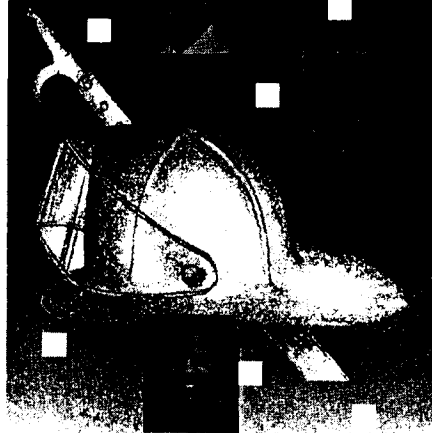
Merlin MacReynold and Rick Kieffer

Local government managers are involved in budget cutting, reorganizations, and service changes more often than not. These situations happen in both large and small local governments. Experience shows that every situation, every environment, is different and that what works in one won't work in another. But experience also has shown that process is the significant common element in all major, successful changes in which managers have been involved. The other common thread is involvement of all of the stakeholders.

A good example of a successful process that involved all stakeholders was a service change that took place in the city of Normandy Park, Washington, in 1995. Normandy Park is a residential community of some 7,000 residents that borders on the Puget Sound and is just south of Seattle. Normandy Park provides police, public works, planning, and administrative services; fire, water, and library services are provided by special districts, and the city contracts with a local sewer district for the services of a sewer treatment plant.

By Focusing on A Process that Was Inclusive of Stakeholders, the City Was Able to Proceed Through A Difficult Service Delivery Issue.

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Before 1992, the city had contracted with a neighboring jurisdiction for police dispatching services, but in 1991 that jurisdiction itself had decided to contract with a regional dispatching organization and closed its own dispatch center. A majority of Normandy Park's city council and its city manager at the time decided to provide police dispatching services in-house, and in 1992, Normandy Park began to supply them.

This service change went from conception to "turnkey" status in just under six months, at an approximate annual cost of \$325,000. Five communication technicians were hired into the Police Guild's collective bargaining unit; the police department records specialist was reclassified and placed in a supervisory role; and the new city communication center was up and running.

To heighten an already charged situation, however, it was an election year, with a primary to be held in the fall and four councilmember positions up for election. Three of the incumbents were running for reelection and had been on the council at the time the communication center was opened. Clearly, the center could become a political issue in the campaign.

The Policy Process

In 1994, the council, emphasizing its concern about the overall cost of the communication center, began to work with the then-acting city manager to find a way to make the center more cost-effective. When Merlin MacReynold came on board as city manager in March 1995, dealing with the center's overall cost still was a primary concern of the council and of the new director of public safety.

The council's public safety committee, made up of three councilmembers, was exploring ways to make the center more cost-effective. The city manager quickly identified the need to focus on a process to make the necessary decisions. Working closely with the director of public safety, the public safety committee soon decided that the issue came

down to the question of whether or not the city wished to offer a high level of service for both the public and the staff at a significant overall cost, or a suspected lower level (at that point unspecified) of service at a suspected lower cost.

The committee, together with the administrative team made up of the director of public safety, the city manager, and the clerk-treasurer, began to examine options and prepare data for each option. If the public safety committee made a recommendation, it was a real possibility that the communication center could be closed and the communication technicians be laid off. To deal with the layoff issue, the city made a commitment that it would provide an aggressive outplacement program if the center was closed.

Councilmembers and employees alike were concerned as the cost analysis was put together. It was essential that the document be an accurate representation of reality and that all costs of three possible options be made clear. The first option was to maintain the city communication center, if the total costs of maintaining the center over three years would be satisfactory. The second option was to obtain contracts with other jurisdictions to provide dispatch service. Third, the city could close the communication center and contract for police dispatch services.

Service levels were a big issue for the council, city employees, and the public. City staff worked carefully to describe the service pros and cons clearly. Developing the service and fiscal impacts of the three options proved to be challenging for all involved, who were trying to be as correct and unbiased in exploring each option as possible so that no one could rightfully claim that they weren't giving a true picture of the impacts.

The administrative team met again with police department personnel and the communication technicians to get an accurate picture and to allow those employees who were directly affected a chance to help in developing the cost information. Not only did this meeting serve this purpose but it also permitted

employees to voice their concerns about the political, budgetary, and revenue environment and to let off steam. The team also gave employees the opportunity to provide written comment; their comments proved helpful, and the experience gave employees some time to think about the information and discuss it amongst themselves.

Another important part of the process was obtaining accurate and timely newspaper coverage of the issue. Team members met with the local newspaper reporter to review exactly what was happening as the process went on, to describe how the cost information was being developed, and to answer any questions. The reporter was invited to the last scheduled meeting of the public safety committee, saw the final touches being added to some survey impact data, and had a chance to ask questions of elected officials and employees before the council's public work sessions. As a result, at least one article appeared in the local newspaper before the public meetings.

Every household in the city received two meeting announcements before the council work sessions. The announcements, which were short and stressed the importance of the possible service change and the need for public involvement, gave a schedule of two meetings to be held a month apart.

The public safety committee, mayor, and city manager discussed how to make the public work sessions as productive and nonadversarial as possible. They decided that the manager should start each meeting by giving a brief history of the issue; the city clerk-treasurer would summarize the fiscal analysis and budgetary impacts of the three proposals; and the director of public safety would present the service comparisons of the alternative options. The public could then ask questions of staff and state their concerns to the council as a whole. The work sessions would then allow the public to meet one-on-one with city staff and councilmembers in different locations within city hall. Between 50 and 60

members of the public attended each of these meetings.

At the first meeting, public opinion appeared to be split, with the main concern being the level of service. At the second meeting, however, public comment clearly favored contracting out for the service at less cost, if then-current levels of service for the public could be maintained.

At the October 10, 1995, council meeting, the public safety committee unanimously recommended closure of the communication center. In turn, the council unanimously voted to close the center and directed the city manager to work closely with the council's public safety committee to obtain an outside vendor for police dispatching services.

The RFP Process

At this point, the manager expanded the team of employees and technical advisers to work with the public safety committee in seeking a vendor to provide a high level of service at a reasonable cost. The new team started its work the day after the council meeting, with expertise from one of the councilmembers on the safety committee helping the administrative team in developing a clear request for proposals (RFP) process and documents to assist potential vendors.

Once vendor proposals had been received, they were all charted according to predetermined criteria and a scoring system, and the list of vendors was quickly narrowed to three. On-site visits were conducted to respond to any questions that the proposals may have left unanswered or to concerns that may have come up. Indeed, throughout the RFP process, several concerns came to the forefront, all centered around the level of service to be provided to citizens.

Three vendors were asked to meet with the public safety committee and with selected employees. After completing the interviewing process, the committee and employees agreed upon the best vendor. The council committee

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made a unanimous recommendation to the council that the city manager enter into a contract for service with a local fire district that was seeking to expand its dispatching service. And at its next meeting, the council voted unanimously to contract for police dispatching services with the fire district communication center.

The Transition Process

Because the period of transition required a new and more technically demanding process and new participants, the city manager formed a transition team consisting of himself, his administrative assistant, the director of public safety, the assistant chief of police, the communication center supervisor, a communication technician selected by the communication center employees, and various advisers as needed.

Meanwhile, the manager had mailed letters to local dispatch service providers announcing the closure of the center and

the layoff of experienced dispatchers. An outplacement program began immediately. Within the week, information on unemployment benefits had been distributed, and within three weeks, an outplacement consultant had been hired and two training sessions scheduled, covering resume writing, networking, and interviewing techniques.

At the closure date, one employee was hired by the city part-time, two dispatchers were hired by outside agencies, and another dispatcher worked in a temporary position for the city until hired by the new dispatch service provider. Only one temporary employee was displaced. Clearly, the outplacement efforts worked.

Development of a service contract and negotiations for services were handled by the city clerk-treasurer. In meetings with the dispatch provider, additional requirements were identified and melded into the contract.

Near the end of the project, a major

problem almost brought everything to a halt, which involved the state criminal history computer system (ACCESS). The system required that specific guidelines be met before the dispatch equipment could be authorized and installed. All guidelines were met, but the actual authorization to install the equipment called for approval from a statewide commission, which only meets quarterly. Only a close working relationship with the controlling agency (the Washington State Patrol) and the tenacity of several dedicated state and city employees enabled the new vendor to be thoroughly checked and recommended for authorization. A telephone conference call among commission members gained the necessary authorization, and the state's installation team completed its work before the switchover day.

Throughout the process, unexpected technical difficulties had put up roadblocks to the process. For instance, the city's telephone services are provided by

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many companies, and two companies were required to work closely together to ensure that the changeover was as smooth as possible. But early meetings with technical service providers from all involved companies allowed Normandy Park to meet the established timeline and to begin operations on December 20, 1995.

All along, the main concern voiced by most employees, police officers, and citizens had been the level of service they could expect. To date, though, police officers have been satisfied with the level of service that Normandy Park receives from the new dispatch center. Citizens have been surveyed through the mail; those who have returned the surveys have reported a high level of satisfaction with the service level they receive from the dispatch service provider.

It Works

The process has worked for two main reasons: (1) Normandy park made the

process inclusive from start to finish, and (2) the city identified the individual tasks and technical requirements as soon as possible.

Open and regular communication allowed the quick resolution of the unexpected challenges that popped up during completion of the many sensitive and technical tasks required to make the change. By focusing on a process that was inclusive of stakeholders, the city was able to proceed through a difficult service delivery issue successfully.

The process was completed within the timeline established, and the people who should have been involved were involved. Most important, the service issue ended in a successful solution that was more cost-effective than before and that provided a high level of service to the citizens. **PM**

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