



CITY OF FRIENDSWOOD

2005 ICMA Annual Awards Program *Innovations in Local Government*

"Bridging the Gaps" Through Organizational Development

Over the past decade, Friendswood like many Houston Metro communities has experienced steady, significant growth. Along with growth, came continuous development, diversifying citizen interests, increased service demands, and expanding workloads and complex, new issues for city staff. This dynamic and progressive environment required the City of Friendswood to creatively approach issues.

Friendswood recognized that one of our greatest challenges was not meeting the growing and changing demands of the residents, but the growing and changing needs of the city organization--our external service delivery could only be as good as our internal support. The working culture for City staff had to promote a high level of trust, open communication, and teamwork necessary for a resilient, problem-solving environment. To ensure the health of our organization, Friendswood decided to embark on an enterprise-wide, employee-driven organization development process. A process to "bridge the gaps" between where the organization was and where it needed to be to help employees provide quality service. A senior staff steering committee outlined a plan to: involve a large number of staff at all levels and departments, give them meaningful and productive participation opportunities during regular work hours to understand the organizational culture, determine areas of needed improvement, and set out a strategic plan for change.

In August 2001, the City of Friendswood took the first step in understanding our organizational culture and condition. 40 city employees representing all departments participated in an Organizational Needs Inventory (ONI) exercise where they discussed their working environment and answered questions regarding the way the City really was and the ideal way the City should be. The information from that exercise was scored and categorized to represent different organizational issues. The difference between the score for the actual and ideal organization represented areas of opportunity for organizational improvement. Friendswood's ONI outlined eight areas for further improvement (gaps): Communication, Flexibility, Identification with the Organization, Innovation, Empowerment, Motivational Style, Trust, Shared Values and Beliefs.

In order to begin bridging the gaps, “Focus Groups” consisting of a trained staff facilitator from the steering committee and five to seven employees from a cross-section of positions and departments were formed to address each gap. The groups each elected a group leader to manage meetings and discussions, a scribe to keep minutes and any records, and a timekeeper/scorekeeper to help keep the group on schedule. The staff facilitator served as a liaison from the steering committee, and provided information, guidance, discussion assistance, and teambuilding as necessary to help the groups accomplish their mission. The Focus Groups were empowered with identifying what specific issues or problems represented the gaps in our City. They also offered preliminary recommendations to address the issues. The Focus Groups’ final reports presented 35 issues and recommended actions to use to close the gaps.

The recommended actions of the Focus Groups were divided into five common implementation areas: Training, Communications, Leadership Development, Employee Morale, and Evaluation/Compensation/Benefits. These areas were to be used as the vehicles to close the gaps in our organization. In July 2002, a “Focus Team” was formed for each implementation area to develop the recommendations from the preceding Focus Groups, design a strategic implementation plan, and propose preliminary budgets. An additional sixth team, Values Guiding Principles, was created to culminate organizational values and guiding principles to provide a common framework for the work of the other five Focus Teams. These teams utilized staff who had not yet participated to fill a majority of the team memberships.

The Focus Teams worked excitedly for 4 months and in the Fall of 2002 finalized 20 implementation/action plans based on the work and recommendations of the preceding Focus Groups. These plans called for new programs, additional employee-driven committees, new employee related policies, and updates to existing practices and procedures. Each of the recommendations has been assigned to the responsible department, employee standing committees, or one of three newly developed employee task forces for implementation. The steering committee will monitor implementation and has assigned member facilitators to help employee committee or task force. The various standing committees will monitor, review, and in some cases administer the programs and projects upon implementation. They will serve as a dynamic entity to help ensure our organization continues to bridge its gaps and avoid making new ones.

The following list highlights ten of the major organizational changes that are either already in progress or preparing for implementation:

1. Employee Core Values and Motto. Trust, Respect, Accountability, and Quality (TRAQ) are the values the organization will use in fulfilling its duties—keeping “Friendswood on TRAQ.”
2. Enterprise-wide Development Training. A 24-month program utilizing in-house and external resources will offer citywide training in: City Core Values & Leadership Basics, Individual Skill Development, Safety, Teamwork, Coaching/Mentoring, City Orientation Refresher, and Customer Service.
3. Benefits and Compensation Advisory Committee. This 6-member committee will aid the Human Resources Office by annually reviewing the City’s benefits and insurance plans, assisting with the annual “Benefits Fair”, helping develop the new employee evaluation system, and other functions.
4. Expansion of the Five Star Award Committee. The committee was expanded to twelve members through a series of subcommittees and will be responsible for employee recognition, suggestion, social, and communications programs. This committee also produces the new employee newsletter.
5. Internal Communication Plans. Each department will outline how it will disseminate information intra- and interdepartmentally.
6. Employee suggestion program. An employee subcommittee is working to implement a process to receive, review, recognize, and utilize employee suggestions.
7. Certification Pay Policy. This program allows employees to receive pay increases for certain job related certifications or degrees.
8. Job Evaluations. A new job evaluation system and scale was selected by employee committee and approved by Council. The new system rates every employee on a core set of criteria, including our employee values, and job specific criteria, including goals and professional development, developed by the employee and supervisor.
9. Employee Orientation. New employee orientation was updated to include a comprehensive overview of city operations. All employees will attend an Orientation Refresher every two years.
10. Employee Wellness Program. An employee committee developed and manages an incentive based fitness and health promotion program that uses web-based software to aid staff in tracking fitness and nutrition. The committee also organizes exercise groups, classes, and other health opportunities.

Each of these programs addresses specific issues identified through this organizational development process and is helping to actively close the gaps between where our organization is and where we want it to be. As these gaps narrow, trust, open communication, and teamwork increase making Friendswood a resilient, problem-solving environment helping the organization better serve the needs of our residents.

In addition to developing plans to directly addressing organizational needs, the process itself began to narrow the gaps in three ways. First, it began to improve employee identification with the organization. To date over 40% of the regular city employees have participated in at least on phase of the process. 50 employees currently serve on committees charged with implementing and managing the various projects and programs developed through this process. By empowering participants to understand and change the working environment for themselves and their colleagues, they became vested in and took ownership for the process. Participants also gained broader knowledge of the organization supporting a big-picture perspective that helps

employees understand their role and its importance to the City. The staff-driven process has helped ensure not only the appropriateness of the strategic plans, but also the necessary support from employees for implementation.

The second unintended benefit is the change in how staff views each other. By fostering an open, participative environment where employees from across departments worked together, they were able to address misperceptions, recognize common problems, and form face-to-face relationships. This has helped to further trust and confidence, encourage teamwork, and promote communication and information sharing between employees. These are all necessary elements to solve the myriad of complex and interrelated problems faced in any local government.

Finally, the process allowed participants to use previous knowledge or special talents and to develop new skills outside their day-to-day work activities. The different roles from group leader to scorekeeper gave employees an opportunity to take on leadership and management responsibilities irrelevant of their department, position, or years of service. The process required research and analysis of complex issues, compilation of written reports, strategic planning, preliminary budget development, and oral presentations to city staff—all are exercises and skills that are beneficial development opportunities for any employee in the organization and further the capacity of the organization as a whole.

The success of the “Bridging the Gaps” process is owed to the dedication, enthusiasm, and hard work of every employee who has participated along the way. Employees have and continue to voluntarily take-on the challenges of this program in addition to their growing workloads. Though this process has already brought significant improvements to our organization, this is not a one-time program. It is a dynamic process, a new way of “doing business” to make our City the best it can be from the inside out!

Due to its staff-driven approach to organizational change, this program is very flexible and can be easily replicated in other communities, regardless of size or location, with little additional budgetary impact and invaluable rewards. It can be easily adapted to concentrate on a specific department rather than the entire organization. Organizational development is an important issue for ALL local governments— excellent external service delivery requires excellent internal support.