Analysis of the Organizational Culture of a Moderately Sized Branch of a Public Library

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Understanding an organization’s culture is vitally important in determining how to function within that environment as either an employee or patron. Further, it is wise for prospective employees to gain a basic understanding of an organization’s culture in order to determine if the environment would be a “good fit” for them. Gordon (2002) states, “An organization’s culture describes the part of its internal environment that incorporates a set of assumptions, beliefs, and values that organizational members share and use to guide their functioning” (p. 374). This paper examines the organizational culture of a moderately sized branch of a large public library system.

The organizational culture of this library was determined through interviews of three employees: the branch manager, a senior library assistant (children’s department storyteller), and a part-time library aide. Informal observations of the library’s environment as both an interviewer and as a patron were also used in determining this library’s culture. Overall, this library can be described as having a forward thinking, process-driven culture. Process-driven cultures focus on quality, customer satisfaction, improving quality, and meeting obligations to customers (Gordon, 2002, p. 375). The process driven nature of this library is reflected in its mission statement and core values. The mission statement for this library is: *Empowering minds, empowering individuals, and enriching our community.* The core values include: service excellence, innovation, lifelong learning, freedom to know, integrity and trust, and staff appreciation. The organizational culture of this library will be analyzed below, keeping in mind the process-driven nature, its mission statement, and core values.

In order to maintain a high level of customer satisfaction, this library places a strong emphasis on the core value of *Service Excellence.* To maintain a high level of service excellence, employees must be knowledgeable and understand the users’ needs and points of
view. To gain this necessary knowledge, all new employees are required to complete internal orientation and training sessions, including *New Employee Employment Seminar*, an orientation session with the library director, *Reference Ropes* and *Reader’s Advisory*. There are ongoing training sessions offered both internally and externally for employees as well, allowing them to stay abreast of current issues, information and technology. Additionally, new employees are required to work closely with their managers to complete 90 days, 6 month, and 12 month checklists. Through this careful training and socialization process, staff members gain the proper skills and knowledge to become valuable library team members.

Professional development of employees is also highly valued within this library system. This library supports attendance at professional conferences. For example, the branch manager of this library was granted funding and time to attend and present at the annual American Library Association national conference last year as well as having numerous opportunities to attend and present at regional meetings and conferences. Supervisors and managers are also required to participate in an in-house leadership curriculum through the library system. Finally, the librarians are required to have Master’s degrees in library science. Most of the assistants have bachelor’s degrees. For those employees who wish to advance their education, the library offers financial scholarships (up to $1000) for employees to pursue their bachelor’s degrees as well as the MLIS degree. The strong emphasis on professional development by this library is in keeping with its core values, particularly *Innovation* and *Lifelong Learning*.

In order to maintain a smoothly operating library, the hierarchical structure is organized such that there are only a few levels of administrators at the top of the organizational chart with the majority of the employees actually spending their time working in the library branches. (See attached organizational charts.) Policies and procedures which affect the entire library system
are made by cross section teams. A Board of Trustees makes the “big” decisions. The library director is described by the branch manager as being personable, open and accessible to employees, well liked and engaged with stakeholders of the community. One could suppose that this openness and accessibility allows the library director to make decisions that assist rather than impede the library staff in meeting the needs of the community. At the branch, the manager and staff feel empowered to make judgments and solve problems that affect the branch. The branch manager of this library is described by his staff as being very team oriented – frequently asking everyone’s opinions in the decision making process. The library aide who was interviewed described the branch manager as one who “empowers leadership” in all of his team members. These hierarchical and decision making philosophies allow the employees to operate the library efficiently and effectively, thereby upholding the core value of Integrity and Trust.

Perhaps the team oriented, empowering approach to managing this library contributes to the relatively low turnover and high morale at this branch. The manager describes turnover as basically nonexistent at this branch. He did note, however, that there was a higher turnover rate during a system wide reorganization that took place about three years ago. The senior library assistant mentioned that there has been a fair amount of turnover in the children’s section of the library, having lost five individuals in two years. She proposed this was due to a difference of opinion with the department manager. The library aide noted that there is basically no turnover in circulation, stating, “People love their jobs!” All three interviewees indicated that employee morale was high; improving from where it had been. The current manager has been in his role since August 2008. Before that, the senior library assistant and library aide described the branch environment as very stifling with low employee morale. Since the hire of the current branch manager, however, these staff members report morale to be very positive.
In keeping with the discussion of employee morale, the larger library system and this library branch place great emphasis on the core value of Staff Appreciation. Appreciation is expressed through rituals of celebrating each other at every opportunity, particularly milestones, and accomplishments. Further, there is an internal recognition system on the library’s intranet regarding good deeds. When an employee does an especially good job at something, they may receive “gems”, which are given by patrons, or “pearls” which are given by fellow staff members. These “gems” and “pearls” are then shared with the manager, placed in their personnel file, and shared on the intranet. Employee recognition awards are given to employees who have been exemplary in their work. These awards may come with cash prizes. Other times, exceptional employees may receive special opportunities such as time and funds to attend a conference.

While morale is high and the staff feels appreciated, one is not to assume that this library is a loose environment in which employees can do as they choose. The culture of this branch and the larger library system as well can be described as a blend of both the formal and informal. The branch manager expects the staff to withhold a high level of professionalism while at work. Employees are always expected to be focused on doing their jobs and work hard. The formal/informal blend can further be illustrated in the library’s dress code. For example, during the week men are expected to wear ties, but on Fridays everyone is allowed to dress casually.

Staff scheduling is also done in a way that is meant to be formal and equitable. All full time employees are expected to work a 40 hour workweek, typically done in five to eight hour shifts. There is also a new option for some employees, four 10 hour days. The staff is also expected to work 1 night per week (12:00 noon to 9:00 p.m.) and also rotate every third Saturday. Even the part time library aides, who work only 19 hours each week, must work one
full day during the week or a Saturday (every other week). When employees do need flexibility in their schedules for particular situations, the managerial staff is willing to work with each employee to meet their needs.

Communication style is also a blend of the formal and informal in this branch. First, formal communication between employee and manager takes place twice a year in the form of performance reviews. At the annual review, employees are eligible for merit increases. New employees are also reviewed at three months and six months during the first year. The branch manager also holds formal monthly meetings with his direct reports. The direct reports then work out their own communication systems with their teams. The children’s department has almost daily team meetings, while the other departments may meet as infrequently as monthly. Two all-staff meetings have occurred in the past five months since this manager’s hire. Besides formal staff meetings, the majority of staff communication in this branch occurs via email and in-person conversation.

The arrangement of the library allows one to assume that the majority of the work done by the staff is expected to be out on the floor with the patrons or behind the circulation or reference desks. The “work areas” are almost invisible to the patrons. There is a general reference desk, a circulation desk, and a children’s reference desk out on the library floor. A circulation workroom is located behind the circulation desk and appears to have adequate workspace for the circulation staff. There is also a children’s department workroom shared by the five members of that department. While small, this workspace is very pleasant and recently modernized. There is a break room available to staff with tables, chairs, couch with a blanket, a TV, and a kitchenette. The only private office in the library is occupied by the branch manager.
The hiring and promotion practices at this library can be described as very formal and structured. New people are hired as vacancies arise. When a vacancy occurs, a requisition is placed in the human resources department of the overall library system. A core team then reviews vacancies on a weekly basis and decides if the hiring process should proceed. An online posting is then made for the position and candidates have a specified time frame in which to submit their online applications. The qualified applications are then sent to the hiring manager. The manager screens the applications, interviews a selected pool of candidates, conducts second interviews of the leading candidates, and then makes an offer to hire. Promotions occur in much the same way. For each promotion opportunity a current employee seeks, an online application has to be submitted in just the same manner as for those who are not current employees. Once hired into new positions, employees are socialized into the library culture and their roles as described above – including attending required training sessions and completing 90 day, 6 month and 12-month checklists with their supervisors to ensure they have attained the skills and knowledge required for their positions.

According to the core value, Freedom to Know, the library values the benefits of diversity and protects and respects every user’s right to know. The library is moving in the right direction of having a diverse workforce. However, with only three non-Caucasian employees and only three men out of a staff of 20, it feels as though there is still room for improvement in hiring a staff with diversity. Of the three individuals interviewed, two were non-Caucasian and both felt that their workforce was an adequate representation of the community. In addition to making moves toward creating a more diverse workforce, meeting the needs of a diverse community is also important to this library system. All managers are required to attend diversity training. The
skills and knowledge gained through diversity training will hopefully be imparted to both the staff and the community as well.

The library also strives to have a diverse collection of materials in order to adhere to the *Freedom to Know* core value. However, the branch itself has little control over collection development; this is done centrally. The bulk of the funding this library branch does receive falls under the programming budget which is used for adults, teens, and children. The library branch also receives a supply budget. Finally, there is a gift fund which the branch manager is able to use at his discretion.

In summary, this library was found to be a process-driven organization. The library places a high value on providing quality, customer satisfaction, improving quality, and meeting obligations to customers. Upholding the key mission of the library, *Empowering minds, empowering individuals, and enriching our community*, seems to be of utmost importance to the staff and the organization as a whole. The library strives to adhere to the mission statement by keeping with the organization’s core values which include: service excellence, innovation, lifelong learning, freedom to know, integrity and trust, and staff appreciation.
References