

Assessing the Roseville Fire Department  
as a Learning Organization

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the Roseville Fire Department as a learning organization and to assess the impact that culture, teamwork, communication, and risk taking have played on the organization's development. A problem being faced by the Roseville Fire Department, and the focus of this research, was that the department was not learning and growing as an organization. This research employed historical and descriptive research methodologies to pursue the following research questions:

1. What are the fundamental steps necessary for the Roseville Fire Department to emerge a learning organization?
2. What historical events precluded the current state of organizational learning in the Roseville Fire Department?
3. What benefit would the Roseville Fire Department derive from participating in an organizational learning assessment?

A literature review was conducted on learning organizations, culture, teamwork, communications, and risk-taking. Interviews were conducted with four of the former Roseville fire chiefs and two lectures relating to organizational learning were attended. An organizational learning assessment was conducted. An organizational learning matrix was constructed. Both of these revealing areas where organizational

learning could improve. Enhancements to improve communications were introduced, including team profiles, staff meetings, and remote office hours. Department-wide training was conducted on transition management and team building.

The research resulted in identifying opportunities to improve organizational learning, communications, risk-taking and teamwork. The following recommendations were proffered. First, our fire department must develop a culture that encourages and supports administrative risk-taking. Second, we must learn how to build and empower teams. Third, we must ensure that organizational communications remains a high administrative priority during times of significant organizational change. Finally, we must re-assess our organizational learning by conducting a follow-up organizational learning assessment at a future date.

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## Introduction

The Roseville Fire Department has provided fire and rescue services to the businesses, citizens, and visitors of Roseville, Minnesota for 55 years. The department has, historically, been innovative in its service delivery to the community. Most notably, the department earned the honor of being selected the Minnesota Fire Department of the Year in 1993. The department also enjoys the distinction of having an Insurance Service Organization (ISO) Town Class 3 rating. There are only six communities in Minnesota sharing this achievement.

As many volunteer fire departments do, Roseville Fire Department elected their chief, deputy chiefs, and district chiefs. Since 1944, all members of the department, including the chief officers served as part-time, paid-on-call members. In the decade of the 1990's, the administrative complexity of the fire department was increasing. In 1997, the city decided, with concurrence from the fire department membership, that it would hire the department's first full-time fire chief. The process took two years. During that time the organization, which was well known regionally as being progressive and innovative, came to a standstill. The chief's staff took a wait-and-see attitude toward new programs and new ideas. The momentum toward learning (as an organization) slowed. Staff meetings became unproductive and eventually ceased to exist. Committee recommendations were not being followed and committees disbanded. Lack of communication, lack of direction, and lack of leadership resulted in the organizational culture degrading into a defensive, self-serving, non-learning state. Morale declined as members were chastised for taking risks and making mistakes.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the Roseville Fire Department as a learning organization. Historical and descriptive research methodologies were used to review the Department's culture, communications, teamwork, and risk-taking behavior and to address the following research questions:

1. What are the fundamental steps necessary for the Roseville Fire Department to emerge a learning organization?
2. What historical events precluded the current state of organizational learning in the Roseville Fire Department?
3. What benefit would the Roseville Fire Department derive from participating in an organizational learning assessment?

### **Background and Significance**

The Roseville Volunteer Fire Department was established after World War 2, when the civilian defense organization was deactivated in Rose Township (Rose, 1994). Over the years, the department has served a steadily growing retail, commercial, and industrial population. Roseville is home to more than 5,000 businesses and industries that employ more than 35,000 people. The Rosedale Mall hosts more than ten million visitors annually. Coupled with six other shopping centers, Roseville is one of the

leading retail centers in the upper Midwest. Over the years, the fire department has expanded to meet the service needs of the City. Currently, 75 paid-on-call officers and firefighters staff three fire stations.

The fire department had traditionally been a progressive department, using modern technology to improve service to the community. From 1989 through 1996, under Fire Chief Joel Hewitt, the leadership of the department fostered learning. Morale was high, personnel were involved in decision making, and most importantly, members were encouraged to take risks to improve the organizational effectiveness (J. Hewitt, personal communication, July 15, 1999).

In 1996, Chief Hewitt accepted a position as the career chief of the neighboring Maplewood Fire Department and resigned as the chief of the Roseville Fire Department. The fire department would then have two more fire chiefs during the next three years. Under their new, and significantly different leadership styles, the department's morale and quality of organizational learning declined. In 1997 the city decided, with input from the fire department membership, that the department would be better served with a career fire chief. New programs and new ideas were thwarted under the guise of "we're going to be getting a new fire chief, let's wait and see what he would want before we start something new" (J. Bodsgard, personal communication, July 25, 1999). This might have been a good strategy had the selection process been timely. But the process took nearly two years. In July 1999, the author of this applied research project was hired, from outside the organization, to become the first career fire chief in the history of the Roseville Fire Department.

Deficient organizational learning was an early observation of the author, giving rise to the need to evaluate the scope and depth of the problem. The organization and the individual members were fearful of taking organizational risks. Learning was suppressed. The organizational culture did not match the department's reputation and their history of successes. Teamwork was lacking, as members bickered about trivial events and differences in philosophy. The lack of staff meetings and open communications had evoked significant damage on the membership and on their trust of management.

As a whole, the membership lost their desire to take organizational risks for the betterment of the department. Some of this loss of desire resulted from frustration within the organization because input from the staff was not valued. There were multiple examples where committees were organized to conduct research for the chief's staff, only to have the chief dismiss the recommendations of the committee and proceed in a different direction (F. LeCuyer, personal communication, July 22, 1999). Compton (1999) points out that management should never constitute a team to review and rubber-stamp an issue on which the final decision has already been made. This is patronizing to the team members.

Various aspects of organizational dynamics were introduced in the Executive Leadership curriculum as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. This research project addressed issues relating primarily to organizational learning, culture, teamwork, communications and risk taking.

## **Literature Review**

A literature review was conducted on learning organizations, assessing organizational culture, teamwork, communications, and risk-taking environments. Literature was obtained from the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy on May 4, 1999, the library of the Fire/EMS/Safety Center for the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities during the months of June and July 1999, and the Ramsey County Library, Roseville Branch, during the month of August 1999. To obtain a broad perspective on the history of organizational learning in the Roseville Fire Department, meetings, training, and interviews were conducted.

Personal interviews were conducted with former Roseville Fire Chiefs Joel Hewitt, Jim Bodsgard, Richard Forliti, and Floyd LeCuyer during the months of July and August 1999. These interviews proved very valuable toward understanding the historical perspective of how the department got to where it is today. Two all-department meetings were held during July and August 1999. During these meetings, facilitated discussions were held about organizational risk-taking and input from the staff validated observations of the author.

A meeting with the department's retirees was held in September 1999. This meeting was very enlightening for the author toward understanding the culture of the department. Discussions with the attendees were facilitated toward helping the author to understand the significant successes and failures throughout the fifty-year history of the department.

The author attended two lectures, relative to this research, at the Minnesota State Fire Chief's Association annual conference, held October 13-17, 1999 in St. Cloud, Minnesota. These lectures afforded the author two additional perspectives on organizational learning from well-respected leaders in the fire service.

To help the members understand the importance of organizational learning, two interactive training sessions were held on October 30-31, 1999, exclusively for the members of the Roseville Fire Department, on topics related to new leadership transition and team building. The sessions were extremely valuable for two purposes. They served to provide the author with valuable data for the benefit of this research. Equally important, they enlightened the members toward understanding organizational learning and teamwork. While it would have been a plausible recommendation at the conclusion of this research for staff members to receive training on team building, the author chose to make this training a proactive portion of this research project.

In order to apply the theories of organizational learning, it was necessary to find an applicable definition of the word "learning." Kiefer (1999) shared the National Fire Academy's standard definition of learning. "Events that result in observable or measurable changes in behavior, brought about by new information, knowledge or skill, put to use in practice, and verified through testing." However, not all organizational learning results in positively reinforced behavior. As he drew a correlation between organizational learning and organizational change, Edgar Schein posed a very thought-provoking question:

If you put a dog in a green room and give it electric shocks, it learns to steer clear of that room. But what happens if the green room is organizational change, and people are so afraid of past experiences with it that they won't try anything new (Schein, 1993, p. 85)?

The Roseville Fire Department was, at one time, a learning organization. However, over the past two years, the leadership style changed. The department's culture adjusted and the members "learned" to steer clear of the proverbial green room. The department's efficiency and effectiveness suffered as a result. Organizational learning is important because it can be a proactive, creative way to plan and direct change to find more effective ways of accomplishing work (Solomon, 1994).

After the city manager announced that the department would be getting a full-time chief, the chief's staff thought it would be appropriate to hold off on new programs, in fairness to the new chief. What they didn't know is that the process would take so long (R. Forliti, personal communication, July 9, 1999). While some would argue that the department stood still from 1997 to 1999, respected members of the department observed that during that time the department suffered tremendously (J. Bodsgard, personal communication, August 17, 1999).

Research by Chaharbaghi and Nugent (1994) made similar observations, noting that organizations must learn to be dynamic in responding to opportunities not only to survive, but to grow. In Roseville, the members lost focus of what was important and they became overly critical of each other, especially when someone tried to do something new (J. Hewitt, personal communication, July 15, 1999). As a result, department members became conservative toward taking organizational risks.

## Culture

The main difference between a learning individual and a learning organization is in the information storage process. Individuals store their learning primarily in their memories, augmented by libraries, notes and other aids to memory.

Organizations store it primarily in their cultures, with a secondary backup in documentation that is useful only if the culture is committed to making use of it (Kline & Saunders, 1998, p. 23).

Until 1999, all members of the fire department's senior staff were elected. This included the chief, two deputy chiefs, and three district chiefs. Efforts by the leadership team to hold the department steady from 1997-1999 were well intended. However, it resulted in a dysfunctional learning organization. Also, the cultural impact of elected leadership was taking its toll on the department. As a captain on the Roseville Fire Department, Munson (1994) made a significant observation with regard to the effectiveness of the department's elected leadership when he stated there were just too many controversial decisions a person in charge had to make to better an organization to withstand a vote. The need for the chiefs to be popular was driving organizational decisions. Kets de Vries and Miller (1991) confirmed the importance of a leader's impact on an organization's learning when they wrote that the culture of an organization and the leadership style of its CEO will greatly influence how change and organizational learning are dealt with, that is, whether the organization is healthy or dysfunctional.

Nutt (1988) found that culture proved to be a powerful way to understand how organizations make decisions. Culture is used as a control device in decision making to ensure that the organizational values are accounted for as choices are made. Kline and

Saunders (1998) noted that much of the inefficiency an organization suffers is due to inadequate training programs, combined with dysfunctional corporate cultures that become breeding grounds for discontent and resentment. As the leaders of the fire service, we set the example for what we want our organizational culture to be. We do that by teaching our organizations core values, integrity, honesty, trust, caring, and service above self (Manno, 1999).

### Teamwork

The fire service does a good job of teaching teamwork as it relates to emergency incident operations but this does not always translate to an effective administrative team which is critical to the process of learning and growing as an organization. As Hewitt (1996) observed, every successful fire department operates as a team. In fact, there is no way for a fire department to achieve success except through the development of a strong and effective team, both on and off the emergency scene.

Fire departments functioned in groups or teams long before it became vogue to do so. There are departments that seem to be able to shift, grow, and change, and there are those that for some reason cannot. One of the keys to stability and security in today's work-world is flexibility and adaptability. Without something to hold on to, fire departments can find themselves committed to yesterday and drifting towards a world that no long exists (Compton, 1999, p. 4).

Administrative teamwork also enhances incident teamwork. This was observed in the Maple Plain, Minnesota, Fire Department.

Firefighters appreciate the opportunity to participate in designing their own jobs and to work in areas of their personal interest, rather than receiving mandated

duty assignments.... The benefits of involving fire fighters in management carry over to the emergency scene; Maple Plain fire fighters exhibit greater attention to details and better performance related to their team assignments (Fire Services, A Best Practice Review, 1999, p. 87).

Fire departments that create administrative teams, task forces, and committees need to ensure that they communicate to the members why the team was formed, what their intended purpose is and the expected results of their work. Compton (1999) tells us that one tool that can help is the team profile. It is a short document that must be completed, communicated internally, and kept current for all standing teams (ongoing) and project teams (special purpose) that are constituted in an organization.

The success of a fire department, as an organization, depends heavily on the contribution of each team member. For the organization to learn and grow, each member of the team must realize that they have a role to play making that happen. This is not at all dissimilar to other groups that are organized to achieve a common goal. As Kline and Saunders (1998) observed, an orchestra or sports team must depend on the performance of the entire group, not just on isolated individuals, to succeed. This example is explicitly applicable to the fire service.

### Communications

Communication is one of the most fundamental requirements for the success of any fire department. Few things can harm an organization worse than poor or inadequate communications. It is not a passive process; it requires constant planning and hard work to be effective (Hewitt, 1996). As a fire department makes the transition toward becoming a learning organization, it will undergo many changes. Some of these changes

can be planned out and well orchestrated, while others will be very unexpected and require decisive action with little time to evaluate the consequences. Hardy (1997) notes that when organizations are under the stress of changing, learning and growing, communications becomes critical. Under these conditions, change managers should explain changes regularly and as fully as possible, communicating more often with their teams than in normal circumstances.

Teams should utilize agendas, action plans, and publish minutes of their meetings in an effort to make the process as open and effective as possible (Compton, 1999). However, quality communications is not limited to memos and notices posted on bulletin boards. For an organization to learn as a team, and to grow, the fire chief must be willing to talk one-on-one with the staff. Hewitt (1996) suggests that chief officers should develop a planned regular schedule to ensure there is face-to-face contact on a regular basis. Staff must be kept informed to reduce their fear and to relieve their frustrations with the unknown. Neese (1998) tells us that employees who understand the need for a new idea or change are usually apt to accept it more willingly with less frustration. This empowers employees to handle new projects with minimal involvement from the boss.

Simply because there is communications between an organization's leaders and staff, it does not guarantee that it is productive. As Kline and Saunders (1998) point out, we sometimes accept the notion that it's okay to blow up at each other, to find fault with each other, to engage in gratuitous criticism and rudeness, while often taking for granted the very things that are deserving of praise and appreciation. Morris (1993) discussed how communications and shared responsibility improves productivity and morale. As a powerful example of this, Morris cited the work of Elton Mayo in the 1920's. Mayo

conducted research at the Western Electric Hawthorne plant in Cicero, Illinois. The phenomenon revealed in Mayo's research, now known as the Hawthorne effect, proved that productivity and morale improved as a result of increased worker responsibility and improved communications in the work place.

### Risk Taking

As observed throughout my career, the fire service is somewhat unique when it comes to risk taking. On emergency scenes, firefighters routinely take risks to rescue victims and save property. But administratively, the same firefighters are more conservative. Morris (1993) suggests that there's a greater willingness to take risks in decision making in a group than as independent individuals. This may explain the author's observations, as firefighters are often grouped on the fire ground as they complete emergency tasks. However, when dealing with administrative tasks, firefighters more often work alone. Some fire departments acknowledge the conservative tendencies associated with taking administrative risk and have taken steps to recognize their members as they step forward to make a difference. The New York City Fire Department bestows medals for administrative heroism to staff members who take a risk to better the administration of the fire department (Manno, 1999).

Department managers must allow the staff the freedom to be innovative and to take administrative risks.

For this to work effectively, firefighters must have confidence that they are being led by competent and understanding chief officers. Firefighters must feel comfortable that they have input into the management process and that they can challenge the status quo, use their own initiative within appropriate limits, and use

their creativity and imagination to implement new and better ways of providing services to achieve the goals of the department (Hewitt, 1996, p. 30).

However, in order challenge the status quo, members need to learn how to take the organization down a new path.

To chart a new direction, to set new and unfamiliar goals, to challenge the unacceptable, to cross old boundaries, and then to build a new structure to improve productivity and the quality of work life, demands a different set of personal characteristics and skills. These require a different kind of preparation and training than those required to maintain the status quo. (Oliver, R. J., personal letter, July 28, 1999).

In order for learning to occur, staff must be allowed to make mistakes.

Organizational learning occurs when errors are detected and corrected, or when a match between intentions and consequences are produced for the first time (Argyris 1995).

However, the fear of making mistakes and the resulting consequences is, within itself, often enough to prevent organizational risk taking. This results in a shortage of firefighters willing to step forward and be accountable, administratively.

Where there's fear of repercussion, there almost certainly has to be a crippling fear of accountability.... Some people, even when the necessity for change is inescapably bearing down upon them, react like deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. They may know what they have to do, but they are too terrified to move. Perhaps they're afraid they won't be able to adjust to the new order, or that they will have to work harder (Kline & Saunders, 1998, p. 49).

When encouraging administrative risk-taking behaviors, leaders of learning organizations must understand and respect the consequence that fear can have on staff members.

Fear tends to transform people into tortoises. It says to them “hide in your shell as long as you can and hope nobody notices you. Just go through the motions of your work, making sure all the technical bases are covered. Don’t be creative, because that could get you in trouble, and don’t try to solve any problems, because that involves sticking your neck out” (Kline & Saunders, 1998, p.45).

Several of the authors researched address the need to overcome fears and to promote risk taking for the organization to learn and grow. In discussing the quote by W. Edwards Deming, “The first principle is to drive out fear,” Kline and Saunders (1998) noted that when people are dominated by fear, they don’t think well, their decisions are poor, and they certainly don’t have a valid picture of where the company is headed – or should be headed.

Hewitt (1996) suggests that when challenged with the status quo, practice ready, fire, aim. That is, don’t get stuck in the paralysis by analysis trap. Develop the innovation, get it on the street, and then begin perfecting it. As the leader of a learning fire service organization, this will set an example for staff members that it is acceptable to try new things without an exhaustive analysis.

View mistakes as stepping stones to continuous learning, and essential to future business growth. Some of the world’s greatest discoveries have been the result of mistakes. A healthy level of mistake making is essential to an organization’s success, because it means new possibilities are being created. Those who make

mistakes learn to take responsibility for them so they are not repeated (Kline & Saunders, 1998, p. 16).

### **Procedures**

The research procedures used to complete this project consisted of three literature reviews, four interviews, attendance at two conference lectures. The author facilitated two departmental meetings and sponsored two departmental training sessions, implemented to improve communications and the staff's access to the fire chief. Given the history of departmental problems that could be traced to inadequate communications from the chief's staff, it was a critical goal to rebuild trust between the chief and the staff.

A program for remote office hours (in each fire station) was started in September. Scheduled in four-hour increments, the chief rotates between the city's three fire stations each Tuesday. To date, many members have taken advantage of the remote office hours as a way to spend quality time, one-on-one, with the chief. The program has also provided the chief with a way to poll the members about the effectiveness of current programs and to solicit ideas for improvements.

In September 1999, a complete departmental reorganization was announced. The department was reorganized for reasons unrelated to the focus of this research. The reorganization was, however, an application of the ready, fire, aim philosophy discussed by Hewitt. A team profile was designed to communicate the purpose of, and to provide guidance to, the newly developed Watch Program Review Committee (see Appendix A, watch program team profile).

A survey of the fire department membership was conducted. The results of the survey were analyzed using a learning organization matrix. The assessment and matrix were adapted from the book Ten Steps To A Learning Organization (Kline & Saunders, 1998). The 36 statement survey (see Appendix B, learning organization assessment survey) was administered to thirty nine members of the Roseville Fire Department attending staff meetings on September 21-22, 1999. Respondents, representing 52% of the membership, rated statements using a 1-5 scale, with a 1=Not at all, 2=To a slight extent, 3=To a moderate extent, 4=To a great extent, and 5=To a very great extent.

We found the assessment pretty reliable at showing up the kinds of problems people in the organization have been complaining about, but in the process it also diagnoses where the problems are coming from, which makes it a lot easier to do something about them. At the same time, identifying and appreciating the strengths is an instructive and beneficial part of the process (Kline & Saunders, 1998, p. 60)

The data collected on the learning organization assessment was transformed on to the summary matrix (see Appendix C, learning organization assessment matrix) on October 25, 1999.

The Matrix is designed, first, to give an overview of – and stimulate discussion about – many of the major issues which must be addressed by any group on its way to becoming a Learning Organization.... Second, it shows which of the Ten Steps applies to the issues raised by each statement.... Third, the results suggest where the organization (as currently viewed by individuals or groups within or

outside it) is currently weak or strong, and which of the Ten Steps may be particularly useful to it (Kline & Saunders, 1998, p. 63).

Members of the department participated in a transition training session on October 30, 1999. Facilitated by Phoenix Fire Department Deputy Chief, Robert J. Oliver, the program is an adaptation of training provided to U.S. military troops when a base gets a new commander. This program focused on three key areas. First, to help the new leader and the existing teams establish common ground to get to know each other better. Second, to prevent many of the early pitfalls new managers create by over or under managing. And finally, to help team members understand the new leader's management style, visions, values, how the group can work best together, and what's expected of them.

The officers of the fire department participated in a team building program on October 31, 1999. This program was also facilitated Chief Oliver. Dynamic interactive exercises focused on critical issues facing the department, such as trust, competition, consensus, communication, and power. The teambuilding program had three main objectives. First, to help the officers to get to know the chief and define his role in the group. Second, to prevent many of the early problems new teams get bogged down with soon after they become a team. And finally, to help the officers define how they will work together, how the officers will be led, and what is expected of each officer as a team member.

## Results

The introduction to this research project identified three research questions. The results of the research are presented as they address those specific questions. The first research question deals with identifying the elements that are required for an organization to learn.

1. What are the fundamental steps necessary for the Roseville Fire Department to emerge a learning organization?

The literature review focused on subjects related to identifying and developing learning organizations. Understanding that culture is the cumulative memory of an organization's past successes and failures helped the author to design new ways to influence the department's culture. Kline and Saunders (1998) tell us that emerging a learning organization is a ten-step process. The fundamental steps are self assessment, promoting the positive, promoting safe thinking, promoting risk taking, respecting people as resources, developing learning power, mapping out a vision, modeling the vision, practicing systems thinking, and taking steps to get the show on the road. This research focuses primarily on the first step, self-assessment.

The research and procedures also revealed that for our department to learn, there must be a change in our culture, a change in the memory of our organization. Communications, good or bad, contribute to the culture in our department and contributes to our department's learning. Our members must feel they are being kept informed about departmental matters to develop a culture of trust. As a procedure of this research, the

author implemented a program to maintain office hours at each of the fire stations weekly. This resulted in providing staff with greater access to the fire chief to discuss concerns or ideas. During these sessions, the chief talked with members about teamwork and the importance of taking risks to progress the department. As the research revealed, if the department does not support and nurture risk-taking, the culture will become conservative, creativity will be suppressed, and the department will not grow.

Prior to 1997, the department held monthly staff meetings. However, as the organization suffered from the loss of leadership, these meetings became non-productive and were discontinued. In July 1999, these meetings were restored. Other improvements were made to enhance communications at all levels of the organization. A newsletter was enclosed in employee paychecks and a meeting was held with the retired members of the department as two additional examples of these enhancements. Feedback from the staff indicates that these activities have resulted in fewer rumors, fewer incidents of passing blame, and increased feelings of ownership for organizational problems.

Teamwork is also critical for our department to become a successful learning organization. During the team building session, the officers developed a greater understanding of each other, how the new chief wants to manage, what the new chief wants to change, about what the team members responsibilities are and about what the officers want and need from the new leadership. As a result of the session, the officers learned ground rules that cover how teams work together to assure the highest level of effectiveness (see Appendix D, team ground rules).

The fire chief and senior staff officers must find ways to turn mistakes into constructive learning experiences. Officers must be willing to get involved and to tap the collective energies of the group to be innovative, creative, and willing to take risks. Oliver (1999) noted that most fire departments operate under a traditional autocratic leadership style, where participation and collaboration are not natural or automatic processes. Both require new learning and practice. Unexpected events and results must be viewed as opportunities for learning.

The second research question sought to evaluate the past events that contributed to the present-day learning in the fire department. The department had a sound record of organizational learning that did not match the observations of the author who sought to research:

2. What historical events precluded the current state of organizational learning in the Roseville Fire Department?

There were many events, positive and negative, that the author observed about the Roseville Fire Department. The first and most significant observation was the one that gave rise to this research. The Roseville Fire Department had a history that reflected organizational learning. Their reputation in the Twin Cities metropolitan region reflected an organization that was respected for being progressive and innovative. While this input came from reputable and respected sources, the observations of the author contradicted this data.

Through interviews with the past chiefs, staff meetings, meeting with the department's retired members, and remote office hours, the author gained a very valuable

perspective on how the department achieved so much success and how, now, the department appeared to be so conservative and stagnant. As confirmed in the organizational learning assessment, the members were not shy to say what was on their minds or to talk about the problems of the department. However, when pressed for answers, many were lacking creativity. The solutions that were offered were conservative. Respondents were overly concerned about how other members might view them for offering a solution or the consequences they might suffer if an idea did not succeed. They were less concerned about how their ideas might help the organization learn and grow. This was not an isolated observation of a few respondents. This observation was made throughout the organization.

The results of this research revealed that electing the officers was hampering the effectiveness of the department. Because officers must withstand a vote from the membership they proved, through multiple examples proffered by staff members, that many decisions are based on what's popular, not on what's best for the customer. It is the belief of the author that a strong, effective leader can endure by doing what's right for the customer, so long as the chief shows that he values teamwork by involving the staff in decision making.

Unfortunately, the effective use of teams and committees was a deficiency of the administration, resulting in members losing interest in serving on committees. Absent effective teams and committees, much of the administrative work and research was being pushed upward to the chief's office. This resulted in the part-time chief being overwhelmed with routine administrative tasks, as work started backing up. This

frustrated staff members even more. The chief's staff delayed addressing some critical issues, choosing to allow the new fire chief to establish policies and set the precedence on administrative procedure. The two-year process to hire the new fire chief left the department with an organization void of effective leadership and it left the membership discouraged.

The final research question, sought to determine the advantages that the members of the fire department would contrive from completing the first step toward emerging a learning organization and asked:

3. What benefit would the Roseville Fire Department derive from participating in an organizational learning assessment?

The learning organization assessment and matrix provided important information about the current state of learning in the Roseville Fire Department and identified areas for development. The mean score proffered by respondents was 2.59. The median and mode were both 2.60. The three highest (most favorable) organizational assessment ratings were given for the following statements, (followed by their score on the 1-5 rating scale). Learning is expected and encouraged across all levels of the department (3.3). There are clear and specific expectations of each member to receive a specified number of hours of training and education annually (3.2). And, there is a general feeling that it's always possible to find a better way to do something (3.2). The lowest (least favorable) organizational assessment ratings, all receiving a score of 2.1, were given to the following three statements. There is a willingness to break old patterns in order to experiment with different ways of organizing and managing daily work. Recognition of

our own learning style and those of co-workers is used to improve communication and overall organizational learning. Teams are recognized and rewarded for their innovations and for breaking away from “that’s the way we’ve always done it” to solve problems.

The average responses to the 36 survey statements were then charted on the organizational learning assessment matrix. The matrix combines the scores of statements that carry similar themes, resulting in characteristic attributes of the department’s learning needs. The matrix revealed our positive learning attributes as well as some opportunities where learning could be improved.

The most positive observation resulting from a review of the matrix was that the department held a high expectation that our organization could improve and that our members were anxious to get started on making those improvements. This finding from the matrix was validated with observations made by the author in discussions with staff members.

Several significant opportunities to improve our organizational learning were also revealed by the matrix. Specifically, members revealed that the department lacked vision, members were not learning from each other and they were not willing to try new things. Again, these attributes were among early observations made by the author, validated through this research. In addition to the organizational learning assessment and matrix substantial benefit was derived from the transition training and team building training sessions.

The transition training resulted in the leadership team realizing that no matter how talented or motivated the individuals in the department are, they cannot be collectively effective without a central focus. The leaders must establish, describe, and chart the future course, as well as redirect the historical inertia. The force of this new momentum should be creative and persuasive enough to re-recruit others for in a new direction and provide the resilience necessary to withstand criticism and setbacks.

The team building session resulted in the department eliminating many months of “settling-in” time by actively pursuing the team building process. New teams developed after this training will have the tools necessary to develop good working relationships and to quickly become productive, unified, and focused on a task.

### **Discussion**

While conducting this research, it was an early observation that the members of the Roseville Fire Department were too conservative and not willing to take organizational risks for the betterment of the department. One example of this observation came with a review of the existing station staffing program, also known as the watch program. The watch program had existed, almost without change, since 1947. When asked, an overwhelming number of firefighters admit the program was ready for change and that they would support changes. This raised two interesting questions. If the members agreed the program needed to change, why had changes not been made? And why had the organization not formed a team or committee to review the 50 year-old

program? The answers to these questions come from discussions in staff meetings where it was learned that previous committee recommendations were not utilized and committee members were chastised when they did offer solutions that led the organization in a new direction. This data was confirmed with the results of the organizational learning assessment and the organizational learning matrix, which identified that members lacked a willingness to break old work patterns and they lacked the initiative to experiment with new ways to doing things.

One dimension of the organizational learning assessment survey provided unexpected results. A relatively high score was earned by the statement “You feel free to speak your mind about what you have learned. There is no fear, threat or repercussion for disagreeing or dissenting.” Of the 36 elements of learning evaluated, this statement received the fourth highest score (3.00). Relative to the mean score of 2.59, this is significant. The department rated highly for its willingness to take verbal risk (speaking your mind). However, it received a conversely low score on the statement associated with putting that risk into action. The statement, “There is a willingness to break old patterns in order to experiment with different ways of organizing and managing daily work,” received a score of 2.10, the lowest proffered for any statement.

The concept of spending quality time with the staff and listening attentively to their needs had been overlooked in the Roseville Fire Department for several years and had taken a toll. The simple act of listening, attentively, to the ideas and the concerns of the staff has yielding noticeable results. The overall participation in emergency calls, training, and meetings has improved.

Unrelated to the focus of this research, a departmental reorganization was announced in September, 1999. Discussions facilitated during staff meetings focused on the need to take risks and on the need to try new things without completing a paralyzing analysis of every possible consequence. Leading by example, the author identified early that the organizational chart was not functional. Drawing on experience and staff input, the entire department was reorganized.

With the announcement of the re-organization, it was also announced that every officer position would have a job description and every position would be opened for a competitive selection process. This change was driven by the department's need to define lines of authority, narrow the span of control, and to build validity into the selection of officers. This was truly an application of Hewitt's "ready, fire, aim" philosophy. The problem was identified and options were reviewed. But most importantly, a swift solution was identified, communicated, and implemented. The message sent to the staff was clear. The chief was leading by example, proving that administrative risk was necessary to challenge the organization to learn and to grow. At its inception, it was unknown how the staff would react to this significant change in organizational design, even though they had input. The feedback on this decision has been positive and supporting. However, it is too early to measure the impact this decision will have in encouraging others to take administrative risks.

The transition training and team building sessions did an excellent job of providing members with skills to make a measurable and positive difference to the overall goals of the department. It will be a job of the chief's staff to reinforce those lessons over time and to monitor progress.

## Limitations

When the organizational assessment was completed by the staff, they were instructed to rate the statements as they knew the Roseville Fire Department to be on July 1, 1999, instead of how they saw the fire department on the day of the assessment, September 21-22, 1999. This instruction was very important in validating the results.

The new fire chief took office on July 12, 1999. Realistically, the culture, communications, teamwork, and risk-taking were not likely to sustain any substantial improvements in that two-month period. However, the members were, generally and noticeably, far more optimistic about the new department leadership and it was feared that the optimism could skew the results of the survey. Nonetheless, the survey results will serve a very valuable purpose when a re-assessment of the organizational learning is conducted at a future date. At that time, inferences may be drawn about the department's learning development.

Another limitation to this research was the population size in the organizational assessment survey. The respondents represented 52% of the membership. This sample size may have affected the survey results in two ways. First, the survey represents just slightly more than the majority of the membership. The accuracy of the survey would increase as the representative sample size increases. Second, it could be argued that the most disenchanted members of the department did not attend the staff meeting and thus, did not provide their input to the survey. If this assumption could be validated, the survey might reveal different results if those members were polled.

## **Recommendations**

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the Roseville Fire Department as a learning organization and to assess the impact that culture, teamwork, communication, and risk taking have played on the organization's development. The problem that the department faced was it was not learning and growing. The research resulted in identifying opportunities for improving organizational learning and produced several recommendations.

First, our fire department leadership team must work to develop an organizational culture that encourages, supports, and rewards administrative risk-taking. In order for our department to grow and progress, our members must be willing to take risks and be willing to make mistakes without fear of detrimental consequences. As officers and leaders, we must learn to have a high tolerance for mistake making. Knowing that the department was once a very productive learning organization, an optimistic assumption would be that the implementation of this recommendation would yield productive results.

Second, we must learn to promote and empower teams and committees. Our fire department depends entirely on part-time, paid-on-call members. It is critical that our organization's leadership promote the use of teams and committees, empowering them to have an active role in assessing the critical needs of the department. Examples of issues and opportunities that the department is facing that would benefit from committees would be recruitment and retention, apparatus and equipment purchasing, and fire department accreditation (see Appendix F, for a complete list of fire department committees). Each

committee should be provided with a team profile to guide their mission and to empower them to complete their assignments.

Third, we must ensure that our organizational communications remains a high administrative priority as we embark on making some significant organizational changes. The quality and quantity of communications was a central theme of nearly every author's work reviewed while conducting this research. Our leadership team has an opportunity, if not an obligation, to ensure our membership is informed of changes and that the communications is two-way. This challenge was placed on all members of the department during staff meetings held from July through October. Exercises conducted in the team building training session revealed ways for the department to improve the quality of communications and feedback. The results of the learning organization assessment and matrix will be shared with all members of the department so they know the organization's current state of learning.

Finally, additional research should be conducted. More specifically, the organizational learning assessment and matrix should be repeated, along with an assessment of the follow-up results to track progress toward developing qualities inherent to learning organizations. With the results of the organizational learning assessment in hand comes the opportunity to start the change process. We should look at the negatives identified in our assessment as possibilities for advancement. The longer term effectiveness of the transition training and team building session should also be evaluated. This should also be reflected in the results of a future organizational assessment survey.

Organizational risk-taking should be tracked along with the resulting successes and failures, much like a baseball team tracks their wins and losses. This is important because, as the research revealed, an individual has a memory. The organizational equivalent to that, is culture. By creating a winning team, and then tracking the wins and losses, the fire department's culture "learns" to be a winning team. We start by getting our team working together toward communicated common goals. Then we introduce mechanisms that encourage and reward risk-taking. Then we will be on our way to building a high performance learning organization.

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*Appendices Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at <http://www.lrc.fema.gov/> to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.*