

Team Evolution in the Public Sector

BY MARSHALL WILEN

A city manager molds a city government into a cohesive team.

Every November in the city of Schertz, Texas, City Manager John Kessel faces a dilemma: A new class of elected officials emerges from what can be a contentious election to join the city government. “There is a natural cycle in our political process,” explains Kessel. “After every election, a new city council forms and we find that we need to rebuild the team.”

How can the city manager keep the city on track when its leadership can change with every election? And how can newly installed politicians, fresh from the election process, learn to work with one another as well as with professional municipal staff? The Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team, an assessment-based learning program from Wiley, provided the framework that Schertz needed to keep its city hall running smoothly.

The team building begins

Schertz is a municipality of 38,000 people located just northeast of San Antonio. In December 2015, immediately following elections, Kessel and Schertz Mayor Michael Carpenter assembled the city council and the heads of all departments to begin the work of transforming a political, and sometimes confrontational, atmosphere into a cooperative one, in which city leaders work together for positive organizational change.

Kessel asked Davis Success Solutions to design a program to help the individuals and the organization understand what it takes to build a truly cohesive and effective team. DSS has been working with the City of Schertz since 2012 and introduced the group to Everything DiSC, the personality assessment based on four styles: dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness. By 2015, Kessel believed that the organization was ready to take the next step in its evolution as a team.

DSS planned a two-day off-site immersion in the Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team. Based on *New York Times* bestselling author Patrick Lencioni’s *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and powered by Everything DiSC, this comprehensive team development program helps team members and leaders understand how their unique group dynamic can build a more effective team and achieve sustainable results.

Using the Everything DiSC personality assessment to establish a neutral language and encourage productive conversations, the Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team facilitated sessions to enable teams to see where they stand within the Five Behaviors model: trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and results.

It’s a process, not just a workshop

According to facilitator Roy Davis, the Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team is “not a one-time training event, but an ongoing organizational development process” for helping individuals in a team learn to work with their different personalities and behaviors to achieve better results. “We don’t just give them a workshop and some takeaways,” he asserts. “It’s not us doing the work; it’s

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them. Especially with political leaders who may have trouble opening up, we have to plant the seed and allow the conversations to emerge.”

Participants were grouped into five teams, organized by function: development, operations, services, administration, and city council. On the first day, Kessel and Davis worked with the department heads and executive team; the second day was devoted to the mayor and the city council, with the executive team in attendance.

Before embarking on their journey, everyone completed the Five Behaviors assessment. The tool enables individuals and whole teams to assess their strengths and challenges and identify the kind of change they would like to see. While each team scored differently in most areas, the assessment results highlighted two foundational behaviors most problematic among all five teams: trust and conflict. Thus, Davis decided to focus on those two areas.

Establishing vulnerability-based trust

Building trust is a central piece of the Five Behaviors process. As Kessel points out, “Before you can gain the public trust, you have to demonstrate and earn the trust of your own colleagues.” The first exercise called on participants to share something personal about themselves and how it affected their professional lives.

Being vulnerable is not exactly a natural state for municipal officers and politicians. Yet this part of the session was “transformational,” says Sarah Gonzalez, assistant to the city manager. Being vulnerable with people they worked with every day helped to build trust in a surprising way. One councilman revealed a formative experience from his youth that altered his teammates’ image of him. “Now we understood what

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drives him,” says a colleague.

“Adding vulnerability as a leadership quality at appropriate times can change internal team dynamics in ways I am just discovering,” Carpenter reveals.

Conflict is our friend

Another exercise involved participants listing behaviors that would be acceptable or unacceptable to the team during their discussions. Each team revealed different levels of tolerance for conflict; some were comfortable with disagreement, while others wanted to make sure the conversation remained cool-headed and calm. By setting their own limits for conflict—and writing them down on large easel sheets—the participants created an environment where conflict became not a threat, but a constructive part of the team conversation.

“All the participants signed their handwritten sheets. Then we had the sheets laminated,” explains Kessel. “Today, the signed posters hang on the walls of their offices as constant affirmations.”

The impact

After their separate team sessions, everyone came together in one room. “We went over the highlights,” says Kessel, “and discussed how we can leverage what we’ve learned to be the best that we can be.”

Calling the process “without question the most enjoyable retreat that I have attended,” Police Chief Michael Hansen noted that “it enhanced the team and my perception of the members.”

Carpenter discovered that the Five Behaviors principles were valuable in

many areas of his life. “I have begun discussing organizational health from a high-level view with my direct manager and my colleagues in my corporate job. Things are already changing, though in small ways at first, for the better.”

The improvements in personal relationships and team behavior since the retreat are evident in many ways. Team members now meet regularly and hash out conflict themselves. They refer to their laminated sheets constantly.

In a post-retreat survey, 90 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their team is stronger for going through the Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team program, and 100 percent believed that it would be beneficial to other teams in the organization.

“With city council and city staff functioning as a cohesive and collaborative team,” says Davis, “they make better, faster decisions, leverage the skills and perspectives of all members, and waste less time and energy on the misdirected priorities and destructive conflict that often define a political organization.”

To Carpenter, the Five Behaviors process has left a continuing impact on Schertz: “We have always been very good at what we do. We innovate. We lead. We win,” the mayor says. “Now, I suspect that we will see a seminal turn of the crank, if you will, where our very culture will be permanently and positively changed, and thus our relevance and successes will be ensured and accelerated.”

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