

Beyond the Org Chart: Mapping the Ties that Bind in the Workplace

City of Bloomington, Minnesota

#Relentless Creativity

Population: 85,866 (2017)

Innovation

Criteria:

- Initiative fundamentally changed a process, product or service (fundamental)

OR

- Initiative builds upon existing knowledge to improve a product, process or service (incremental)
- The initiative substantially stretched the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.

Describe Your Innovation

(When and how did this innovation get started? Do also detail how the program or policy innovative, how it has changed previous processes, products, or services, and how it has substantially stretched or improved the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.)

In its effort to become a high-performing organization, the City of Bloomington's Community Services Department went beyond the typical employee satisfaction survey to find out how work really gets done. A poll the year before found that while there was pride and passion in the overall work that employees did, some felt there was poor communication and limited opportunities for relationship-building. We hypothesized that this indicated there were areas in the department where trust was lacking.

When we were approached by university researchers about a free project that would provide map out the social networks in our department, we jumped at the opportunity. Organizational network analyses are rare for local governments – we were the first public sector entity the researchers had studied.

Our 2017 analysis entailed site visits, an employee survey that probed into linkages between employees and a mapping of various networks in the department's divisions. The analysis gave us a behind-the-scenes look at the informal networks in the department – the employee friendships, who goes to whom for advice, and who trusts whom – all in a confidential, anonymous manner.

It indicated where teams were cohesive and employees were willing to trust their coworkers. It also identified where disruptions existed and distrust was prevalent.

Since then, we have conducted an in-depth assessment into parts of the department where the density of the friendship network was low and the trust network fell into the negative category. Based on interviews with employees and stakeholders, we are restructuring the department to better align it with the City Council's strategic priorities, improve accountability and more effectively utilize staff's strengths and talents. We have also initiated other efforts such as a quarterly newsletter help employees get to know each other better and to build more informal networks across the department.

Collaboration

Criteria:

- Initiative demonstrated engaging stakeholders both internal and external.
- Initiative demonstrated high performance teaming, breaking down internal silos.
- Strategic partnerships and or community networks were developed as a result of the initiative

In less than 200 words, what individuals or groups are considered the primary initiators of your program? How does the innovation engage stakeholders or demonstrate high performance teaming? What strategic partnerships and/or community networks, if any, were developed?

The primary initiators of this network analysis internally were Community Services Department

Director Diann Kirby and former Assistant City Manager Elizabeth Tolzmann. A strategic partnership was formed with researchers at the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota and the University of Wyoming.

Also instrumental in this research were the employees of the Community Services Department. In order to provide a comprehensive and accurate look at the division's friendship, advice and trust networks, the analysis required that at least 80 percent of the department's employees complete the survey. Out of 122 employees, 103 responded to the survey for a response rate of 84%. This response rate was sufficiently high enough to be confident in the results.

It was the partnership between staff, management and researchers that was key to helping uncover new insights about the role of social networks in our department.

If a private consultant was used please describe in detail their involvement, identify the consultant and/or firm and provide contact information. Maintain a 100 word maximum.

We collaborated with two university researchers to conduct this organizational network analysis. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the survey results, survey results were collected and held in a server at the University of Minnesota. The researchers analyzed the data and created maps of the advice, friendship and trust networks within each division of the Community Services Department. They collaborated with the City on presenting the final results to the department's staff and management team.

Dr. Pri Shah, University of Minnesota, shahx007@umn.edu 507-202-8174

Dr. Stephen Jones, University of Wyoming, stephen.jones@uwyo.edu 763-202-0429

Significance

Criteria:

- Initiative addresses an area of concern for the majority of local government organizations.
- Initiative can serve as a model and replicated in other jurisdictions.

Please describe the extent to which you believe your program or policy initiative is potentially replicable within other jurisdictions and why? To your knowledge, have any other jurisdictions or organizations established programs or implemented policies modeled specifically on this project? Please also provide verification of the replication.

While the concept of a mapping an organizational network is relatively uncommon in local governments, it is definitely replicable within other jurisdictions. I initially heard about social network analyses during a national conference of organizational development specialists in 2016. We were the first public sector organization that our own researchers had studied.

Private consulting firms offer this service, particularly those that specialize in human resources work. We were fortunate to have the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota in our back yard.

They approached us about becoming a research site, and promised that the results would be balanced between theoretical and practical applications. They hoped to uncover new insights into the role of social networks in public sector organizations while providing us with a window into how these networks were functioning within our group. If other organizations are interested in an organizational network assessment, it's advised that they start first with a local college or university, and inquire within their schools of management or organizational development.

Effectiveness

Criteria:

- Initiative addresses a community or organization need.
- Initiative has achieved tangible results.
- Initiative improved the organizational culture or the traditional approach to problem solving.
- Initiative has received recognition for its achievements, i.e. independent evaluation, national recognition, local press, etc.

Please describe the most significant obstacle(s) encountered thus far by your program. How have they been dealt with? Which ones remain?

An initial obstacle was achieving survey participation by at least 80% of employees, approximately 120 people. We were challenged with the fact that data collection was taking place during summer vacation time. Another hurdle was the survey length, which took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

The department director communicated directly with all employees before, during and after the data collection period. The key messages were: 1) individuals would not be singled out or identified in the final results – only the researchers would have access to individual responses; 2) the overall results would be shared with all employees after when research was complete; and 3) staff's insights would enhance our workplace culture and help us become a higher-performing organization. To encourage participation, treats were delivered at key points throughout the data collection period. This proved to be very successful in creating awareness and improving response.

The challenge now is creating a culture of trust in all areas of the department. In preparation for an upcoming departmental restructuring, we've been meeting both individually and in various groups throughout the process to ensure staff's ideas and concerns are heard and respected.

What outcomes did this program or policy have? Could you share one or two objective measures that demonstrate these outcomes? Ultimately, how did you measure the change based on the intervention, and why do you believe in the credibility of this assessment?

We knew from a past employee satisfaction survey and anecdotal evidence that employee relationships were strained in parts of the Community Services Department. But we didn't realize the size and scope of the problem until we conducted this organizational network assessment.

Nearly all of the department's divisions had core groups of employees with thick trust ties. But there was one area where the density of the trust network fell into the below-zero range. Trust is considered a good indicator of social support. Social support is defined as help that is given without restriction by coworkers when they need it.

We just recently completed a comprehensive evaluation of the staff and services of two divisions within the department. During individual interviews and group meetings with employees, we heard recommendations on how to foster trust and engagement among staff. We have since been restructuring the department to strengthen relationships, improve accountability and more effectively utilize staff's strengths and talents to focus on a critical area of the City Council's strategic priorities.

The initial reaction from staff about the new alignment has been very positive. They feel their voices have been heard and are optimistic about the future of the revamped division. They are committed to creating positive and productive working relationships with their coworkers.

A next step is figuring how to leverage the power of the informal employee networks that are already working, and working well. How can we use these networks to spur greater creativity and improve our operations?

Tapping into these webs of relationships could help us more effectively drive innovation and engagement while achieving our strategic goals.

Has the program received any press or other media coverage to date? If yes, please list the sources and briefly describe relevant coverage.

No.

Presentation

Criteria:

- Presentation will be delivered by a team.
- Presentation will be highly interactive and engaging.

Example Social Media Post

Do you know how work gets done in your organization? You won't find the answer in your org chart. Discover out how one city went beyond the typical employee survey to map where workers were building relationships – and gained new insight into how work is really conducted.

Please write an abstract or short description for your innovation that would make conference attendees say "Well, I need to attend this session!"

Do you know how work really gets done in your organization? You won't find the answer in your org chart. Workplaces are full of social networks built around connections such as trust and friendship. These networks often vary widely from the formal structure of an organization. How networked an employee is can affect how long they stay, and how productive they are.

Find out how the City of Bloomington, Minnesota, went beyond the typical employee survey to map out where employees were building networks across one department. An organizational network analysis can shed new insight into areas of excellence as well as areas for improving communication, cohesiveness and trust. Take a fascinating look behind the scenes at the ties that bind when employees reach out to their coworkers to make their work lives more positive and gratifying.

How will you make the session creative and unique?- How do you plan to be both entertaining and educational?- Include a description of how your session will facilitate group activities and/or interaction.- What will attendees be able to have as an actionable "takeaway" from the session?

We'll start the session with an engaging and active way to experience a web of interdependencies. The audience will be asked to participate in the Connection Game – an exercise in which their movements around the room depend on the actions of others. Attendees will become aware of the complexity and the interdependency of their actions on other people. The game will be followed up with a quick debrief on who had influence, how changes in movement affected one's influence, etc.

There will also be tabletop discussions built into the session. The first will focus on how relationships and information-sharing are important in how the attendees get their work done. Another will ask attendees to brainstorm how to apply an organizational network analysis to opportunities they may be encountering in their own jurisdictions. Key takeaways will be reported at the end of this roundtable.

The presentation itself is very visual. Maps of the three networks that were analyzed will be shared with the group – trust, friendship and advice. They very visually illustrate the webs of relationship and the density of employee networks from one group to the next.

Anything else you would like to add?

It's worth noting that our project researchers were surprised by the level of transparency that we gave to the results of our organizational network analysis. Their experience had been that results were typically shared on a limited basis – if at all – with employees in the private sector. Our philosophy was that the more employees knew, the better informed they would be and the more engaged they would be in the organization. It also fit with our organizational philosophy of leadership at all levels, where everyone is heard and respected so that trust is generated across the organization.

As a result, we shared the network mapping results all in a day's time, starting with a meeting with the department director and city manager, followed by an overview with division heads and ending with a meeting of all staff. That meeting was videotaped and posted to the City's intranet site for those who could not attend. The researchers asked us if we wanted to share all of the findings – the good, the bad and the ugly. Again, in our desire for transparency we decided it would be best if our employees heard it all.