

# The Troubled Department

## Reversing the Decline & Rebuilding

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### **Reversing the Decline**

The XYZ Department within a large bureaucratic organization was in serious trouble. For several years the department had weathered a succession of management-union-worker strife, which, by now, had led to the near institutionalization of conflict and mistrust. In this highly stressful environment, employees sought safety by forming cliques and parking lot board meetings. Gossip and intrigue was becoming the informal mission of the department. Recently a new department manager had been installed with instructions to *clean up the mess*. She ably began to bring some order to a situation that could only be described as chaotic. But it was clear, more and different assistance would be necessary. Senior management agreed to provide her with an outside team-building consultant who could assist her in the effort to *turn this department around*.

### Services Provided

After consulting with senior management and the department manager it became apparent that no real improvement could occur until the complexities of the problem were identified. The consultant began by entering into a collaborative partnership with the department manager. Success would depend upon a relationship of mutual trust and respect. A comprehensive interpersonal and organizational climate assessment was undertaken involving the completion of an anonymous questionnaire, focus groups and confidential individual interviews with representative employees. All data was organized and sanitized of identifying information. The results of the assessment were presented to the entire staff (management and line staff) during a half-day department retreat. In order to underscore the integrity of the process, neither senior management nor the department manager received advance copies of the results. Everyone learned the results at the same time. In small breakout groups and as a total group, the implications of the results were discussed. The atmosphere was anxious, but as time went on and discussion unfolded, anxiety was replaced with cautious hope. *“Perhaps things can change. Maybe we could have a fresh start.”* During the discussion, members of the organization made suggestions, which, by the conclusion of the retreat, had become the basis for a tentative Organizational Improvement Plan. The consultants coupled these suggestions with their own into a recommended plan to reverse this troubled department.

### Outcome

Not everyone, but a significant number of the staff members, began to believe that things could be better. They became excited and hopeful at the prospect that they could change their organization. The downward decline has dramatically slowed. A great deal of work was yet to be accomplished. Management must now *step up to the plate* and implement the recommendations.

## **Rebuilding Trust & Effectiveness**

As a result of the positive outcome of the Organizational Improvement Assessment process, the downward decline that once characterized the XYZ Department within a large bureaucratic organization had dramatically slowed. An Organizational Improvement Plan had been developed. The challenge now was to collaborate with the Department Manager, Supervisors, and Staff in the design and delivery of organizational improvement initiatives, all of which must be calibrated within a culture that remains highly volatile - easily influenced by attitudes and events completely outside the control of the consultants.

## Services Provided

An Organizational Improvement Steering Team was appointed, consisting of the department manager and eight volunteer line staff members. This group coordinated all improvement initiatives, provided an Aear to the ground@ for staff feedback, responded to natural staff resistance, and monitored the continued integrity of the process. Staff and consultants developed a ceremony to mark the *end of negativity* and the beginning of a *Fresh Start*. Two special Task Teams were established to begin addressing specific concerns. One group was charged with identifying areas within the department that needed attention and seeing to it that those issues were brought into the open where they could be resolved. Another group worked to establish a Code of Behavior that would later be agreed to by all members. Consultants conducted mediation sessions between/among various individuals and sub-groups, including the union steward and the department manager. Three half-day seminars were scheduled: *Understanding Differences*, *Communicating Under Pressure*, and *Handling Stress & Change*. The Leadership Team participated in a half-day team-building meeting where difficult issues were candidly, but productively aired. Work units within the department also participated in team building meetings facilitated by the consultant. As needed, the consultant met with the department manager and unit supervisors to work on needed issues. Monthly departmental staff meetings were held to review and calibrate progress.

## Outcome

Real organizational improvement is a slow process that involves honest changes in what people believe and how they feel. Most people made some progress toward joining the positive momentum. Others decided that the positive changes did not serve their interests and chose to leave the department. The department went from one of the lowest regarded departments in the organization to receiving praise and national recognition, within its field, for innovative accomplishments. Still, there remained pockets of negativity and cynicism. The efforts must continue. Overall, the progress achieved during an eight-month process was both substantive and satisfying.

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