

Save the Knowledge Keepers[©]

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Barry Strock Consulting Associates, Inc. is a municipal management and technology-consulting firm specializing in local government, school district, and not-for-profit business process re-engineering, change management, and technology procurement and enhancement.

Save the Knowledge Keepers: When Local Governments and Schools Districts Physically and Fiscally Downsize, Critical Knowledge is at Risk

Let's face facts: Local governments are in deep and perhaps unrecoverable fiscal crisis, and quite a few may be facing bankruptcy, receivership, and/or consolidation. Even for those remaining more solvent there will be ongoing threats to financial resources and service delivery. It is unlikely that governments will ever return to former size and services as they shrink their employee base and curtail service delivery. The good news is that bloated government created inefficiencies in work processes, and workers have not been accountable to best practices. The solution will require courage on the part of government leaders to resist special interests and focus on re-engineering government for significantly more efficient and effective budgeting and service delivery. Believe it or not, governments can do more with less as seen in the dramatic productivity increases in the private sector during the recent recession. As a result, execution of these functions that are the province of government will involve more automation and the prudent retention of competent and knowledgeable staff that are capable of productive work through effective work flow and problem solving.

In circumstances of financial crisis or financial exigency¹, all bets are off – it is a rare moment to make a significant correction in course, eliminating the residues of organizational persistence and dysfunctions that are part of the current budgetary and service crises that have brought both local and state governments to their knees. It is an opportunity to actually re-engineer government. To do this executives and managers must be prepared to do the following:

- Inventory of all personnel skills, engaging in critical and prudent performance and skills assessment of every individual
- Review all business needs and service requirements
- Revamp and align all job descriptions and positions to contemporary business and service requirements
- Insist on knowledge sharing -- policies, processes and procedures must be documented by each employee.

¹ Financial exigency is a concept used in higher education to signal that the institution is in such serious financial straits that its very existence, especially in regards to its mission, is at stake.

Government, with its personnel policies and employee hierarchies, create knowledge hoarders who maneuver for job security by knowledge concealment and knowledge fragmentation. This failure to share knowledge has been an obstacle to doing the business of government. Those Knowledge Keepers who have been transparent and actually made the wheels of government turn more effectively and efficiently are often hidden in the organization. The challenge is to identify the knowledge keepers and retain them during times of downsizing and consolidation, while taking advantage of re-tasking and redeploying employees toward organizational and work best practices. Business process and personal re-engineering has been done in the private sector for a long time. Now is time to bring reform and re-engineering to government.

Who are the Knowledge Keepers?

The endangered resource of government institutions are the Knowledge Keepers who are the critical resource to carry the organization forward during downsizing, consolidating, re-engineering, and outsourcing of services. The Knowledge Keepers often disappear or show up opaquely in the organizational charts. They routinely get less pay per hour compensation than their peers, yet they work many, many more hours than many of their peers and bosses. Typically Knowledge Keepers are clerical staff who over many years evolved into gathering and processing more data and information day by day. They are central to the everyday workflow of a department, understand policies and procedures, and work to get the tasks done despite the organizational dysfunctions. They have learned to work around obstacles, to make their bosses look good, and often cover for the absence of knowledge by their superiors and coworkers. They traditionally work excessive hours, either in the office, or they take work home. They are typically honest, hard working, dedicated, loyal, thrifty, and thoughtful. They often would rather redo a job themselves to keep from having to report someone else's failures. They are not often in senior positions, and are likely at risk during downsizing. If the Knowledge Keepers are not retained or engaged in knowledge transfer, including implementation of software systems, downsizing will result in exacerbating the dysfunctions of government, making government services less efficient without significant decreases in cost.

How do we find the Knowledge Keepers?

In the process of a simple business process audit Knowledge Keepers stand out. The audit is a tracking of the flow of information from one source or person to another and can describe the people and processes in a very simplistic flow diagram. This audit should not require more than two or three days of work and interviews. Knowledge Keepers can identify sources of data, teach people how to work through the intertwined steps of gathering and processing data, and how to encourage them to carry their legacy forward. There are books written on knowledge transfer and knowledge management, but in preparation of an imminent fiscal crisis in local government, we need to focus on remedial tasks for survival and making the best of some bad situations.

The Need for Knowledge Transfer

“Data” and “information” are often abundant, in paper files in filing cabinets or on top of filing cabinets, in paper boxes, on post-it notes, under the felt blotter, in leather bound binders, and of course in MS. Excel, Lotus or MS.Word electronic spreadsheets, and in key individuals personal memory, and in MS.Access or other databases. Typically the data is maintained, but unfortunately, many offices only trust that the Knowledge Keepers know:

- which data is correct;
- where the correct data is;
- how to analyze the data;
- how to manipulate the data to generate reports;
- what the history is of the data in the context of needs;
- what alternatives there are to doing business differently.

Unfortunately “knowledge” is not always available or shared to know what data and information exists; where it is; how to use it; and who controls it. This is a failure of management systems, and puts the business and services at risk every time a Knowledge Keeper quits, is fired, or retires. The retention of true Knowledge Keepers on the one hand, and an effort to ensure knowledge transfer on the other, is a critical task of contemporary government. By knowledge transfer we mean transferring knowledge from within and between organizational units and between persons.

While attention must be paid to retaining those entrusted with this knowledge and who are willing to share it rather than hoard it, government needs to specifically address ways in which automation can assist in knowledge management, including data capture, storage, security,

transparency, access, and distribution. These automation functions are available in software applications that specialize in record retention, data retrieval, rational and transparent work process and information-flows that make knowledge sharing more rational. Knowledge Keepers have been the stop-gaps who often have smoothed out dysfunctional processes, and they generally embrace new systems that make it easier to get the job done. Knowledge hoarders will resist these systems since they threaten the exclusive ownership and access to information. In both cases, it is critical that the organization be committed to knowledge transfer between staff, thorough documentation, and embedding processes when possible in the application systems.

How do Knowledge Keepers operate in specific institutions?

Schools: These Knowledge Keepers often are the only people who KNOW where a version of an electronic spreadsheet is used for attendance, and which one is used for report cards, which one is used to track the students cell phone and emergency phone or text numbers, and who know which kids leave the building often during the day. The Knowledge Keepers often know how to navigate between incompatible applications such as finance, student attendance, student records, grading and transcript systems, and demographic data. They would eagerly embrace unified systems but these systems seem out of reach because administrators and school boards are sometimes short-sited regarding the productivity benefits of these applications, and are held hostage to personnel bloat.

Water Dept and DPW Garage: There are different teams of Knowledge Keepers in water departments and public works. There are those who are the customer service employees who turn water on, turn water off, and take care of all of the billing, money, service address, customer service calls, mailing addresses, meter readings, and quality of water service issues. A second is the team who tests, reads, and fixes water meter reader devices. A third is the group who maintains the water treatment plants, the water distribution lines, valves, shuts offs, and repair water main breaks. It has been our experience that the Knowledge Keepers embrace more unified systems that create work flow efficiencies and improved customer service. But the obstacles remain the same – knowledge hoarders, turf protection, and unimaginative administrations keep government services more

expensive and less efficient, a recipe for disaster that is coming to fruition.

Finance Office: Finance offices seem to have two groups of Knowledge Keepers: one is a paper tracking obsessive-compulsive types who are driven to find a way to ensure that the books balance, the payable and personnel checks get out and reports are accurate. In the second group are the report writers: they know how to extract the information from the system to generate the monthly, quarterly, and annual financial reports. The latter group is especially important in knowledge transfer as application systems encourage self-service query and reporting on the part of departments and employees.

Law Enforcement and Fire Departments: Law enforcement and fire departments are military command and control types of operations, with a chief or sheriff who is the operating commander, supported by Knowledge Keeper that does the bulk of the business, budgeting, check writing, and paper tracking needed for the office to survive. There is also a field crew of officers who manage law enforcement operational functions, including dispatch functions, law records management, and reporting.

How to Ensure Knowledge Management and Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge management and knowledge transfer is required to manage any organization, but it is even more acute when the organization is downsizing, consolidating, and also may be transitioning or migrating to a new software system. Executives and managers needs to pay attention to the *strategic* needs of the organization, and employ effective *tactics* to insure knowledge transfer and systematic knowledge management and access.

Change Management is a critical method that should be deployed to assist management in changing or readapting the Business Re-engineering *P-Issues*: People, Policies, Processes, Procedures, and Paperwork. Downsizing without a well conceived Change Management Plan is like building skyscraper without a blueprint.

Succession Planning must be part of the Change Management Plan. If there is a reduction in human resources there must be a plan that depicts the flow of authority, and knowledge, from one person to another to seamlessly permit re-engineering to come to fruition.

Often the role of the job [i.e., administrative assistant to the City Manager] dictates the Knowledge Keepers roles, tasks, and responsibilities. However, over time sometimes the keeping of knowledge and information becomes a tool or weapon of power and control. When bringing in a new computer system the Knowledge Keepers may be the only people who know about some specific items of information and often these key granules of information could be the key to failure or success of a new system migration. Sometimes because of anger at being fired or myriad other reasons, the Knowledge Keepers do not cooperate.

We have found over decades of working with Knowledge Keepers that the vast majority of them are more than willing to cooperate if they are asked. However, too often they are excluded from the decision planning process. Although the Knowledge Keepers may hold the keys to the kingdom, they often are not identified on any organization chart and they typically are not making large salaries. For example, when we manage daylong software demonstrations of new software, too often the Knowledge Keepers are not invited. They are generally very hungry to participate and help, but many times management excludes them from the entire information conversion process. The obvious solution is to ask Knowledge Keepers for their cooperation: include them in planning and decision making processes, and reward and recognize them for their participation.

Fiscal crisis, automation, and early retirement arrangements may be natural processes that force the retirement or downsizing of Knowledge Keepers. Key in the management process should be to embolden the Knowledge Keepers with pride and a feeling that they want their legacy of their accomplishments to move forward into the future. In addition, to ensure knowledge management and knowledge transfer a key means is to encourage Knowledge Keepers to show and train their replacements:

- As a legacy project, offer the Knowledge Keepers an opportunity to develop Knowledge Transfer documentation of every task they perform and then train or mentor their successors or a cross-train another person in the office.
- Maintain them as outside consultants for up to six months to train or mentor their successors. As consultants, Knowledge Keepers can serve to work with the new software vendor to provide the gateway to transitioning and migrating of data.

- Consider some form of retirement delay as a means to help transition your department to a knowledge managing and knowledge sharing organization. The Knowledge Keepers can help document processes, procedures and policies, embed them into automated systems, and cross-train other employees.

The critical first step signaling the intent to seriously re-engineer work processes is the inventory of personnel skills and performance and skill assessment of employees, in the context of business needs and service requirements. Doing so will permit the re-engineering of work tasks requiring new job descriptions, and require knowledge sharing.

The conclusion is obvious – identifying, retaining, valuing, and rewarding the Knowledge Keepers is a key element in re-engineering local government. Knowledge Keepers must be engaged in the process of knowledge management and knowledge transfer, and knowledge hoarders must be either rehabilitated or replaced. Now is the time....

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