

**City of Spring Lake Park
Climate Assessment Interviews
Finding and Recommendations Summary**

Presented by Susan J. Herreid Ph.D, CEAP
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BACKGROUND:

Susan Herreid Ph.D, CEAP (Organization Development Consultant) was initially contacted in October, 2020 by John Thames (City Legal Counsel) to discuss possible consultation services. Mr. Thames mentioned that he was looking into various consulting options based on a discussion with Dan Buchholtz (City Administrator). He shared some background including a brief overview of the current work environment, and they discussed several consulting options and recommendations. As a result of their conversation, Mr. Thames requested that Dr. Herreid provide a brief proposal or overview of the recommended climate assessment process. He let her know that he would pass along the proposal and her contact information to Mr. Buchholtz for his review and consideration.

Several weeks later Mr. Buchholz contacted Dr. Herreid to discuss the recommended climate assessment in greater detail. At the end of their conversation, he said that he would like to move forward with her recommendations. They discussed next steps including identifying several dates for conducting the interviews. She also shared information with Mr. Buchholtz that he could use to create a brief memo about the climate assessment process. Dr. Herreid suggested that he meet with his management staff to discuss the purpose of the climate assessment, so that they could share the plan with their staff groups. He would also provide all staff with a memo that provided an overview of the interview process (including dates and scheduling plans, interview confidentiality, summary of themes and a plan for sharing the information with all interview participants, etc.).

APPROACH:

Dr. Herreid met with staff members and management personnel on a voluntary basis on November 12, 13, 16, 17, 19 and 20. She also conducted several phone interviews due to staff being out of the workplace or in quarantine due to COVID exposure. All staff were offered several dates and times for interviews that would accommodate their schedules. At the beginning of each interview, she described her role as an Organization Development Consultant. Interviewees were told the assessment process is a strategic approach to gathering feedback and their individual perspectives about the team and the current work culture. Dr. Herreid also brought up recent changes due to the pandemic and the impact on staff and their work duties and responsibilities.

Interviewees were reminded, per the memo, that their specific feedback would be kept confidential. She let them know that only common themes, issues and/or concerns would be outlined in a brief *Assessment Summary*, along with recommendations.

If requested, Dr. Herreid could assist the Administrator and identified stakeholders to create an action plan based on the insight and recommendations offered in the summary document. Dr. Herreid would also return to share the information with management personnel. Additionally, she would conduct review session(s) with the staff without the management personnel in attendance (per the normal process).

INTERVIEW FINDINGS, FEEDBACK AND THEMES:

It is important to note that the information contained in the “Feedback, Findings and Themes” section does not necessarily represent the comments of every individual who participated in the interviews, but rather is an outline of common issues and concerns expressed by a majority of those interviewed. It is an assessment of interviewee’s perceptions and perspective) about the current workplace that is not necessarily based on facts. When there are consistent perceptions, it is important to address those issues proactively.

Repeated concerns were brought up through the interview process about the confidentiality of the information shared. They were re-assured the assessment is a confidential process. Unfortunately, a significant portion of city personnel chose not to participate due to ongoing trust issues and concerns about punitive actions from some members of city leadership. Therefore, it should be noted that the majority of the feedback came from the City Hall staff and the Police Department.

Furthermore, there were frequent comments about the perceived lack of follow-through by some members of city management. Based on past experiences, many expressed concerns about management personnel’s commitment and accountability to make sustainable changes once the information is shared and the initial part of the process (Phase 1) is complete.

It is important to note that a vast majority of those who did participate in the interviews shared many positive comments about enjoying their jobs. They talked positively about their professional relationships with their colleagues. They also talked very positively about their interactions with other city personnel within other departments who they have most often found pleasant and helpful. Staff expressed pride in their work and a strong commitment to the city and the services that they provide to the community on behalf of the city. Interviewees also expressed respect for the knowledge and professional experiences of many of their colleagues. Many of those in management positions also talked with high regard about the staff they supervise.

Most interview respondents also expressed the need for an improved work culture. Interviewees shared feedback about areas for improvement and several other significant concerns that they believe are having a negative impact on the workplace and have affected employee morale. While a majority of the staff reported enjoying their work, they expressed concerns about the current environment, leading a good portion of the staff to report that they have considered looking for other opportunities outside of the city. Many of the interview participants (staff and management) believe that some of these issues are ultimately impacting the city’s ability to attract, support, value and potentially retain high-quality personnel.

There also are themes specifically related to the Police Department. There will be an additional summary document focusing specifically on the feedback themes that will be shared with the Administrator, Police Chief and Police Department personnel.

The common issues that have been identified in the assessment process have been grouped into the following themes (which are not listed in order of priority):

- **Communication, Consistency and Follow-through**
- **City Leadership**
- **Management and Supervision**
- **Engagement and Empowerment**
- **Training and Orientation**
- **Role Clarification and Job Expectations**
- **Policies and Procedures**
- **Equity and Consistency**
- **Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution**
- **Teamwork and Collaboration**
- **Employee Morale and Job Satisfaction**
- **Professional Trust, Respect and Accountability**

Communication, Consistency and Follow-through

Interviewees shared concerns about what they perceive as a lack of consistent and timely information from city leadership (City Administrator and City Council) about policies and procedures. Staff discussed recent examples regarding the lack of information shared about the pandemic along with clear expectations and updates when changes occur. Consistent staff meetings within all departments would be helpful so that information can be shared and discussed in a timely manner.

In addition to a lack of transparent communication, there is a lack of direct communication including collaborative discussions and the ability to give or receive constructive feedback in a professional and respectful manner. Many respondents shared examples of either witnessing or experiencing others (including both staff and management) who have demonstrated disrespectful, unprofessional and, at times, demeaning communication.

City Leadership

Interviewees expressed appreciation that the City Administrator initiated the climate assessment and hope there may be a newfound awareness based on staff and management's feedback. Furthermore, they expressed hope that there would be follow through with a process that would support needed culture changes within the city.

While the majority of the staff recognize the Administrator's skills and abilities related to many aspects of his job, they perceive him to be unapproachable at times. They question if he has time to effectively deal with day-to-day operational issues and oversight or supervision of administration staff in addition to his other direct reports (for example, Department Heads). In addition, to the current resources there may be a need for additional human resources support.

Management and Supervision

Currently, tensions between some management personnel have contributed to a lack of collaboration and, at times, divisions within the city, impacting collaboration between departments. There is a need for all city management personnel to lead by example and demonstrate professional actions and behaviors in an effort strengthen credibility and respect. Staff reported situations' in which some member(s) of management have demonstrated a defensive and argumentative style, which makes them difficult to approach and results in staff preferring to avoid interactions.

There are perceptions that some management personnel are unwilling to listen to other's ideas, suggestions or input. Interviewees found this particularly of concern when it directly affects employee/staff group's work or how they do their jobs. Furthermore, after a decision has been made or change implemented, there is rarely an opportunity for discussion so that those affected could better understand the decision-making rationale.

It is important to stress that many of those who participated in the assessment, as well as some of those who declined, expressed significant concerns about possible retaliation as a result the assessment process. They expressed fears that there are member(s) of the management team who they believe will make assumptions about "who said what," resulting in retaliatory actions and behaviors. (Examples of perceived past negative consequences were shared)

Engagement and Empowerment

There is interest in having a work environment in which management personnel can empower staff in their roles. Unfortunately, due to the current atmosphere, some employees report being less engaged, because previous attempts to provide input or offer suggestions have been ignored or dismissed.

Training and Orientation

The on-boarding process for new personnel should be reviewed. Both staff and management personnel would also like to have the Department Heads support training and greater access to professional development opportunities.

Role Clarification, Job Expectations and Personnel Matters

Tensions within administration may be due, in part, to a lack of role clarity and appropriate division of duties. Staff would like to discuss and clarify positional duties and responsibilities as well as cross training, backup, and coverage expectations.

Feedback included concern about the lack of access to human resources. Participants also expressed concerns about how personnel matters are being dealt with and if they are addressed in a consistent and equitable manner.

Policies and Procedures

Some staff report that they have not had consistent information regarding city policies and procedures. They specifically expressed concerns about recent pandemic practices and expectations.

Equity and Consistency

Interviewees perceive that standards, practices and/or expectations have not been consistent among city personnel and that inequitable expectations have led to perceptions of favorable treatment within some departments. The lack of consistency between management personnel within and between departments has created confusion and misunderstandings.

Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution

Some staff report that it has often been difficult to work through issues and/or resolve problems because some people react very defensively. It was clear during the interviews that some past misunderstandings, disagreements or conflicts have not been addressed or resolved. Some of these issues are believed to continue to have an impact on professional interactions. Additionally, there is interest in learning more effective skills for defusing and resolving conflict.

Team Work and Collaboration

There was predominantly positive feedback about the support and collaboration from most city personnel and colleagues. Yet, there are comments about feeling as though they “have to walk on egg shells” when interacting with some members of management and/or co-workers. These stressors often inhibit individuals’ willingness to collaborate.

Employee Morale and Job Satisfaction

Several consistent comments were about “antiquated” practices which reportedly feel de-meaning. A majority of city personnel expressed interest in having an improved work culture within their department and the city overall. The hope is that if the leadership can support an improved work environment, the city will be able to attract strong candidates and retain current experienced personnel.

Professional Trust, Respect and Accountability

There are concerns about the lack of respectful and professional leadership and accountability within in some departments. Interview participants overwhelmingly shared the hope that city leadership will recognize the value of their feedback and they can work collaboratively together to create a plan for moving forward.

Efforts going forward need to be a shared responsibility by both staff and management. True culture change will require all city personnel to reflect on their personal contributions (both positive and negative) to the current environment. Management should lead this process by making efforts to build professional trust, to demonstrate transparency, to be consistent and to commit to sustainable changes.

PRESENTATION OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS:

Dr. Herreid will present the information and feedback shared through the assessment process and compiled in a Findings and Recommendations summary to the City Administrator. Information will also be shared with the City Council for their review and consideration. Dr. Herreid will also meet with management personnel to review the feedback and recommendations. Finally, she will review the summary with staff in several groups (without leadership in attendance per the normal process) to review the summary and action items, and to discuss next steps.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the interview feedback and current issues playing out, Dr. Herreid recommends the following for the stakeholders' consideration:

Summary Review, Consultation and Planning:

Dr. Herreid should meet with the City Administrator and identified stakeholders (TBD) to discuss the assessment outcomes in greater detail and determine action plan for addressing the identified themes and high-priority next steps.

Professional Development Coaching and Consultation:

Consider providing coaching sessions to identified personnel (staff or management). This process is intended to support and assist the coaching participant(s) with specific professional development needs and interests as well as helping to further strengthen and enhance skills so that they can more effectively deal with work-related issues.

Other possible discussion topics may include but are not limited to: effective communication, professionalism and boundaries, managing/diffusing conflict, collaboration and collaborative problem solving, effective performance management, etc. As part of any coaching process, Dr. Herreid would share a documented coaching plan for review with the participant as well as his/her supervisor for onsite support and accountability.

Role Clarification and Cross Training Expectations:

Work with the consultant and administrative staff to clarify roles per the job descriptions (JD), discuss and define the division of work duties, and responsibilities. Additionally, make a plan for cross training to ensure the necessary coverage based on best business practices.

Administrative Reporting Structure:

Consider restructuring and potentially re-assigning some administrative duties in order to have more appropriate oversight, supervision and accountability within the department.

Human Resources and Personnel:

Define performance expectations as well as provide information about the city's personnel policy, specifically as it relates to supervisory coaching and the process for disciplinary action. Consider additional personnel related resources to assist staff and management in day to day human resource related matters.

Management Team Work Session(s):

Work with the management team in several work session(s) over a 3- to 6-month period. This process would focus on leadership development, role clarification, and delegation of duties, as well as other issues/areas identified as a result of the assessment. The goals and outcome of any work sessions should assist in further strengthening the team's communication and collaboration skills, assisting the team to provide effective performance management, strengthen leadership and supervisory skills, and demonstrate reasonable flexibility along with the necessary accountability.

In addition, the Administrator should consider working with management and staff collaboratively to create a standards and expectations document that focuses on the city's mission and values specifically related to respect in the workplace. Such a document could also be a part of a new employee orientation and on boarding process.

Resolution Session(s) (as requested)

Conduct voluntary resolution sessions with two or more parties to identify, address, and resolve communication and/or interpersonal issues that have affected their current working relationship(s). Resolution sessions would be facilitated by Dr. Herreid. The participants would address issues that have caused problems in their past professional working relationships, but will primarily focus on what needs to change regarding communication, problem solving and conflict resolution going forward.

At the end of each session, Dr. Herreid would share a written summary agreement with those participating in the process. Participants would have the opportunity to review the document to ensure an accurate summary of their discussion. As determined at the onset of the process, the information may also be shared with the appropriate management personnel for on-site support.

Staff Work Session(s)

Work with the identified departments/staff groups on issues identified as a part of the assessment.

Follow-up Process

3- to 6 -Month Post Consultation:

The Administrator could consider conducting a follow-up discussion several months after the completion of the formal consultation process. This check-in would be an opportunity for Dr. Herreid to follow up with city personnel (via interview, questionnaire, etc.) for the purpose of discussing progress and recognizing successes, as well as identifying areas for ongoing focus. A follow-up process is recommended approximately 3 - 6 months after the formal consultation process has concluded.

