



## NORTH ST. PAUL

# **Resilient Communities Project**

## **Cross-analysis of October 2013 Staff Retreats and SWOT Activities**

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## **Overview**

In the fall of 2013 the City of North St. Paul hired a new city manager, Jason Zimmer. In his new position, Jason has encouraged a culture of ongoing reflection. This means that each city employee considers his or her responsibilities as individuals and recognizes how each of their roles is a component of a team and the larger organization as a whole. A series of retreats were held in October, 2013, when Jason hosted three groups of staff including the city council, the city leadership team, and staff employees.

Notes from each retreat were captured documenting the activities and contributions from participants. These notes were used by the University of Minnesota (U of M) Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development (OLPD) students who were charged as an evaluation team to analyze the retreat outcomes. What follows is the analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) exercises completed during the three retreats. The synthesis is meant to provide useful data about the common themes drawn from the feedback of each group of participants.

## **Methods**

A team of seven master and doctoral students from the University of Minnesota, OLPD Evaluation Studies program conducted the analysis for the city. The analysis examined the SWOT exercises that were done as a part of the retreats hosted on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, and 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013. (It must be noted that each team of employees, i.e., council members, leadership team, and staff attended a specific retreat date).

The student evaluation team analyzed the commonalities and differences of the participants' responses presented in the different sections of the SWOT exercises. The goal of the cross analysis was to provide the city with appropriate information about all the retreat days so that it can be used for future planning purposes.

## **SWOT Analyses**

### Strengths

When looking at themes across the three retreat groups (staff, city council, leadership team), strengths can be summarized into three overarching themes:

- The idea that “we care,” or commitment and dedication to the city
- “Employee retention” characterized by longevity and loyalty
- “Employee characteristics” characterized by professionalism, including follow-through and a strong customer service orientation

In addition, each group had a slightly different take on positive characteristics, including background of personnel, knowledge, and how employees are perceived (such as with integrity, pragmatic, or humor). All three retreat groups saw the compassion, retention of employees, and characteristics such as professionalism as strengths of employees. In addition, the council and leadership team noted characteristics of the community and city, such as its downtown, which are notable.

## Weaknesses

Key themes for weaknesses included:

- Communication
- Organizational and change processes
- Resources, particularly staff and staffing
- Trust
- Direction

While each group had a slightly different perception of process weaknesses, the concerns could be generally characterized as challenges related to decision making and difficulty with change.

Groups also identified aspects that limit the city's ability to effectively make decisions and manage change processes. These included "fear of failure," a need for "more openness," and "emotion(al) influences." The staff and leadership groups also perceived a lack or loss of morale. This came across in words such as "respect," "morale," "weariness," "lost enthusiasm," and "fractured." The Council also described the opposing perceptions of the city context that were not viewed as assets, such as vacant properties or business relations.

## Opportunities

Four themes that stood out across each group of the retreats as opportunities of growth for the city/organization were the following:

- Communication: Better engagement of the public on city decisions and improving the timeliness and effectiveness of current communication efforts
- Staff acknowledgment: Increasing recognition and appreciation of staff and community members. Also, seeking out opportunities to showcase the uniqueness and benefits of the community
- Community engagement: Increasing involvement with schools in the district and the growing diverse populations in the community
- Staff engagement: Improving organizational engagement between staff and the new City Manager. Another benefit would be cross training of staff to create redundancy.

Two final points noted as areas of opportunity included the leadership and creativity of the city and staff.

## Threats

Three major themes stood out from the documents as areas on which the city should focus:

- Aging population and the aging population of volunteers
- Concerns about the city's "desperate need" for development opportunities and its current relationship with the business community
- Organizational threats including, but not limited to: turnover, lack of accountability, lack of a unified (direct) vision, and resistance to change.

- Note that some of the items listed as opportunities from one retreat were also listed as a threat in another retreat.

### **Recommendations**

With the initiation of a cultural change process, North Saint Paul's new city manager has also stimulated the ideas of city staff, leadership, and city council members for improvement of service delivery, organizational development, and community engagement.

Although organizational development and change processes are often challenging, it appears that successful management of these processes can be facilitated through strategic planning and further evaluation activities. Using the SWOT activities of October 2013 and other processes since, certain baseline measurements can be determined with which future growth can be compared. This document synthesized data and themes from these SWOT activities.

## Appendix

A cross analysis of the strengths and weaknesses identified by all three groups (staff, leadership, and city council) was conducted. The similarities and differences are presented below.

Three major themes emerged from the cross analysis of strengths among the three groups. The themes that cut across all groups are “people focused” and highlight the importance of employees for the City of North Saint Paul. These themes include “we care,” “employee retention,” and “employee characteristics.”

1. **We Care:** characterized in a few words to demonstrate groups’ perceptions that the organization as a whole has interest and concern
2. **Employee Retention:** characterized by longevity and loyalty
3. **Employee Characteristics:** characterized by professionalism including follow through and customer service stance. In addition each group had a slightly different take on positive characteristics including background of personnel, knowledge, and how employees are perceived (such as with integrity, pragmatic, or humor).

All three retreat groups see the compassion, retention of employees, and characteristics such as professionalism as strengths of employees. Additional employee characteristics identified by individual groups are listed in the charts below.

#### 4. Assets of the City:

It is worth noting that the council and the leadership team mention several factors that are not employee-specific, but are focused on the assets of the city. In fact, both the council and the leadership mentioned the downtown as a strength.

Table 1 Strengths

| Themes                             | City Council          | Leadership Team           | Staff                   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <b>We Care</b>                  | “good heart”          | “care”                    | “compassion”            |
| 2. <b>Employee Retention</b>       | “longevity”           | “loyalty of staff”        | “employee retention”    |
| 3. <b>Employee Characteristics</b> | “diverse backgrounds” | “pragmatic”               | “humor” or “work ethic” |
| 4. <b>Community Assets</b>         | “car show” or “EDA”   | “history” or “small town” |                         |

**Communication:** a descriptor that appeared across all three teams as a weakness.

Three major themes emerged as weaknesses across the staff and leadership teams. These include limited staff/staffing, trust, and direction.

**Process:** weaknesses that described process came across in all three groups. While each group had a little different take on identifying process weaknesses, the concerns could be characterized as challenges addressing decision-making and change. Groups identified aspects that can limit the organizations' ability to make decisions and manage change. These aspects

considered affect such as "fear of failure", "more openness", or "emotion influences." Other aspects deal with the role of policy, availability of those who can make decisions, and the process itself. The staff and leadership groups perceived a lack or loss of morale. This came across in words such as "respect", "morale", "weariness", "lost enthusiasm," and "fractured." In addition, the Council described the opposing perceptions of City context that were not viewed as assets, such as vacant properties or business relations.

**Table 2 Weaknesses**

| Themes                                     | City Council                                      | Leadership Team                     | Staff  |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| Communication                              | "not always have the facts"                       | "more openness"                     | "lack of consistency"                                    |
| Organizational and change processes        | "finding consensus" or "fear of failure"          | "following policies"                | "interpreting policies" or "organizational complexities" |
| Resources, particularly staff and staffing | "vacant properties" or "let police officers down" | "resources/financial" or "tax base" | "not enough time" or "availability of decision makers"   |
| Trust                                      | "not sticking to stances"                         | "weariness" or "fractured"          | "lack of leadership"                                     |
| Direction                                  | "convincing change"                               | "lost enthusiasm"                   | "stuck in status quo"                                    |

**Table 3 Opportunities**

| Themes               | City Council  | Leadership Team | Staff                                     |
|----------------------|---|-----------------|---|
| Communication        | "be timely, effective, and real"                            | "new ideas"     | "follow through"                          |
| Staff acknowledgment | "employee feedback"   | "willing staff" | "listen to feedback"                      |
| Community engagement | "engage diverse population" or "engage public on decisions" | "new ideas"     | "public relations" or "educate community" |
| Staff engagement     | "staff engagement"  | "willing staff" | "continuing educational opportunities"    |

**Table 4 Threats**

| Themes                             | City Council                                       | Leadership Team                     | Staff            |
|------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Aging population                   | "aging volunteers"                                 | "demographics"                      | "cynicism"       |
| Need for development opportunities | "desperate for development"                        | "stuck"                             | "limited budget" |
| Organizational threats             | "resistance to change" or "no sign of involvement" | "silos" or "lack of accountability" | "job security"   |