

The Role of Organisational Culture in the Merger of English Local Authorities into a Single Unitary Authority

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ABSTRACT *Cornwall Council is a new “unitary” local authority which was created following the merger of six district councils and one county council on 1st April 2009. A questionnaire survey based on specific “dimensions” of organisational culture was circulated to staff prior to the merger date. Overall, the results indicated a generally congruent culture characterised by a strong team spirit and commitment to the workplace. A number of differences were observed between the cultural orientations of the seven councils, but there was only weak evidence of differences between tiers of management or professional groupings. The study suggests that the new organisation will have to find ways of “unfreezing” staff from their established ways of thinking and working before changes can be properly embedded. It is recommended that the organisational change process shifts from a top-down “planned” approach to a more “emergent” approach to facilitate learning and organisational development.*

KEY WORDS: Local authority, unitary authority, local government, merger, culture, organisational change; organizational change

1. Introduction

With an annual budget of approximately £100 billion, local government accounts for roughly 20% of total UK public expenditure (Chisholm and Leach, 2008). For this, local authorities provide a variety of essential services ranging from education to refuse collection. However, local government is going through one of the most rapid periods of change in recent history. Like other parts of the public sector, councils are under increasing pressure to find more efficient ways of working whilst meeting central government targets and working within rigorous performance management regimes. There has also been a drive towards *joined up working*, meaning that councils are expected to treat local priorities as “wholes” rather than deal with issues on a departmental basis. This includes working more effectively with organisations such as the police, health service, and parts of the private and third sectors to deliver services. Government inspections indicate that some councils are struggling to embrace these changes, and whilst this may be attributed to a number of factors, some commentators identify “organisational culture” as a barrier to change (Shaw and Lord, 2007).

Most rural parts of England have a *two-tier* system of local government with county councils and district councils operating within the same geographic area but providing different services. More recently, a number of local authorities have been undergoing major reorganisations into *unitary* councils. Within Cornwall, this process has involved merging seven organisations into one; Cornwall County Council plus six district councils: Caradon, Carrick, Kerrier, North Cornwall, Penwith and Restormel. Each previously had their own identities and independent management structures. This paper presents a study of Cornwall Council (CC), which became a unitary authority

during the course of this research. The paper seeks to explore the relationship between culture and organisational change within the context of CC and to consider any implications for the change process within Cornwall and other local councils facing similar re-organisation.

Following a review of pertinent literature and an outline of the methodology employed, the results of a questionnaire survey are presented and discussed. Finally, the conclusion sets out recommendations emerging from the results of the study.

2. Drivers of Local Government Change and Reorganisation

Since the early 1980s, the reform of public services has been a priority for many governments worldwide (Andrews et al., 2009). The objective has been to create organisations that are more efficient, dynamic, entrepreneurial and responsive to market forces. Reforms reflect the political philosophy known as *New Public Management* (NPM). NPM with its market-based prescriptions has sought to shift activity from public to private through the marketisation of some goods and services (Rethemeyer and Hatmaker, 2008; Meier and O'Toole, 2011). A strong emphasis has also been placed on changes to management systems to enhance performance (Moynihan and Pandey, 2005). In the UK, this approach has been embraced by both Conservative and Labour administrations and has led to a period of continual change across the whole public sector (Thomas and Davies, 2009). Indeed, the previous Labour government in the UK subjected English local governments to sustained periods of reform under their *Local Government Modernisation Agenda* (see Laffin, 2008 for a full review of these reforms).

NPM was pioneered during the Thatcher administration, with most emphasis being placed on resource constraint and savings. Within local government, the main policy instrument was *Compulsory Competitive Tendering* which obliged local authorities to organise competition with private contractors for any work they undertook. It aimed to replicate market forces and drive down costs (Rashman and Radnor, 2005). The Labour government abolished this initiative in 1999, replacing it with *Best Value*. Whilst Best Value still allows privatisation of council services if cost savings can be demonstrated, it places greater emphasis on working efficiently and improving internal processes (Harris, 2005).

In recent years, the government have strongly emphasised the need for improved co-ordination between the activities of local government, the police, fire service, health service and representatives of the local community to provide “joined up” strategies for areas. These are known as *Local Area Agreements* and are prepared by *Local Strategic Partnerships*, made up of the different partner organisations.

Sullivan and Williams (2009, p.164) highlight the challenge of getting public sector organisations to work beyond their “established professional, institutional and geographic boundaries”. One issue is the potential clash between different organisations, especially where they risk losing autonomy and control. Another concern is the sheer complexity of dealing with so many organisations and interconnected problems. Importantly, in the context of moving towards greater partnership working, local government adds to this complexity because in rural areas the “two-tier” system means that both county and district councils operate together in the same place. Kingham (2007) believes that the division of responsibility between counties and

districts is appropriate, because counties deal with “strategic” matters that lend themselves to large geographical areas (e.g. education, waste management) whereas districts deal with “operational” matters that require closer working with local communities and hence smaller areas (e.g. planning applications). Nevertheless, the Labour government described the situation as “confusing” (DCLG, 2006, p.63) and advocated a move towards unitary local government i.e. the merger of county and district councils into single organisations.

On the 1st of April 2009, seven counties and 37 districts within England merged to become nine unitary councils. The stated reasons for these changes were to achieve cost savings estimated at £100 million per annum, and help to improve local strategic leadership (Leach, 2009). However, these claims have been subject to high-profile criticism, particularly by Chisholm and Leach (2008; 2009) who argue that the changes are not in the interests of the councils involved and have been made for the convenience of civil servants.

Whether unitaries will lead to economies of scale is a moot point. In a government commissioned study comparing local authority size with performance, Andrews and Boyne (2009) were unable to reach definite conclusions. Meanwhile, Game (2009) suggests that economies of scale usually exist in respect of capital intensive activities rather than the labour intensive activities that dominate local government. Nevertheless, there is a clear expectation from government that unitary councils will deliver savings (DCLG, 2010).

Another criticism is that unitary proposals are based on a “universal” assumption that all councils are the same. Leach and Lowndes (2006, p10) argue that every area

has “unique settlement patterns, organisational cultures and political histories” which lend themselves to different organisational forms. Wilks-Heeg (2009) adds that unitaries tend to have large, centralised departmental structures in order to drive down costs. Given the geographical size of some of the new local authorities (Cornwall covers 1,376 square miles) there is a fear that the organisations will become distanced from the communities they represent.

Perhaps the best indicators of future performance are the unitary councils created during the last round of English local government reorganisation in the 1990s. Writing at the time, Fenwick and Bailey (1999, p.256) observed that “A number of authorities have sought to flatten their management structures to make cost savings. The majority of authorities surveyed, however, have retained fairly traditional departmentalised structures”. Indeed, in a government commissioned study of all local authorities, Bovaird et al., (2009, p.38) found that improved working was not linked to organisational restructuring but instead “linked to changes in organisational culture and internal processes”.

So whilst the unitary authorities may have been restructured, there appears to be little evidence of *second order* changes. Crawford and Stein (2005, p.415) suggest that second order change only occurs when there is “fundamental cultural and behavioural change in the organisation, such that all generations reflect the change”. Using this definition, structural reforms to local authorities could be regarded as *first order* changes which in themselves do not necessarily achieve the desired outcomes.

The challenge facing the new unitary authorities is therefore twofold. Firstly, the councils involved have to manage the process of splitting, merging and restructuring

into a single organisation. This can be traumatic for the staff concerned and has the potential to raise significant resistance to change (Atkinson, 2009a). Secondly, there needs to be what government has called a “transformation process” so that the new unitary authorities operate differently from the individual councils they replaced.

3. Models of Organisational Change

Despite the amount of money invested in public sector organisational change programmes, research indicates a high rate of failure. Jun and Weare (2011) note that public institutions often hurry to adopt the innovations implemented by other units, but the quality of the replications may be weak. Often organisational change takes longer than expected or fails to meet managerial expectations (Morris and Farrell, 2007). This has become a distinct topic of enquiry since the 1950s and a number of models have been developed to help explain the organisational change process, mostly based on the experience of US private sector firms. However, Atkinson (2009b) argues that they are highly relevant to the challenges facing new unitary councils.

The often cited model of change developed by Tushman et al. (1988) shows how organisational development usually takes the form of periods of incremental change punctuated by periods of “frame-breaking” change. Organisations are constantly fine-tuning their operations, making small incremental improvements. However, at times when major change is needed, incremental adjustment will not bring about the major changes in strategy, structure and people that might be required. When this point is reached, the organisation will need to undergo “frame breaking” change, requiring deliberate managed intervention.

Buchanan and Dawson (2007) describe a continuum running from emergent change to planned change, suggesting that managers need to design a change process that best meets their individual circumstances. Of course, the task of creating new unitary councils is a situation that must require a heavy element of “top-down” planning because it is not practical to merge local authorities together through incremental changes. Many local authorities are good at planning change, but their ability to deliver is weak, because the change is normally driven by government rather than the organisation itself. A greater focus on people (rather than process) may be necessary for successful change to take place. Planned change normally consists of a series of steps. One of the earliest and most quoted models of planned change was developed by Lewin (1951) and involves three steps; unfreezing, moving and refreezing.

Unfreezing involves changing people’s normal modes of thinking to heighten their awareness of the need for change. It involves disturbing the status-quo by either strengthening the forces that could push for change or weakening the forces of resistance. *Moving* is the process of making the actual changes that will take the organisation to the new state. As well as involving new types of behaviour by individuals, this includes the establishment of new strategies and structures. *Refreezing* involves stabilising the changes to prevent backsliding into old ways of working. It may even involve the recruitment of new staff who are untainted by the old habits.

Atkinson (2009b, p.38) warns that Lewin’s model is often simplified and codified. He believes that Lewin’s understanding of how change occurs was “at a much deeper level than most of us can obtain” because it was based on detailed studies of human psychology. This draws attention to the importance of what might be considered the

informal parts of the organisation. One view is that organisations are comprised of *formal* and *informal* components. The formal organisation is comprised of strategies, structures, systems and procedures. Because these concepts can be easily understood they are, in general, capable of being planned. On the other hand, the informal organisation is less tangible. It consists of linked variables such as human behaviour, organisational culture, internal politics, leadership style and informal groupings. Whilst it is debateable whether the informal organisation can undergo planned change, it can play a key role in helping or hindering the change process.

4. The Impact of Organisational Culture

According to Atkinson (2009b, p.39) the reason why change programmes experience such high failure rates is often due to the organisation's inability to "unfreeze" prior to a change event. He argues that unfreezing is the most critical part of any change process but also the most difficult because "human change is a profound and painful process...as self esteem and identity hold us so firmly where we are". The ability of an organisation to successfully unfreeze is often termed *readiness to change*. Readiness is about enabling organisational members to let go of the current ways of doing things, both physically and psychologically (Cinute et al., 2009). Groups of people facing the same situation find ways of adapting to their environment which sets them apart from other groups. This is perceived as their "culture" (Hofstede, 2001). One of the most succinct definitions of organisational culture comes from Deal and Kennedy (1982, p.4) who simply describe it as "the way we do things around here".

The model of organisational culture developed by Schein (1992) describes it on three levels. *Artefacts* are the physical and tangible aspects of the organisation. *Values* are the espoused strategies, goals and philosophies of the organisation. *Assumptions* are the unconscious, taken for granted beliefs which tell group members how to think, perceive and feel. As these are unconscious, they are rarely debated and are difficult to change. According to Schein, the true organisational culture is only revealed at this very deep, unconscious level, with the implication that the articulated goals of the organisation are only likely to be realised if they are compatible with the unconscious assumptions of employees.

Managerial attempts to influence culture are based on the assumption that changing elements of the “formal” organisation will lead to changes in the “informal” organisation. For Brooks and Bate (1994, p.11) strategy, structure and culture are “all part of the same package”. They argue that changing people’s roles, responsibilities and relationships leads to associated changes in individual behaviour and attitudes. This is an assumption strongly held within government literature such as *Ten Steps To An Effective Performance Culture* (LG Improvement and Development, 2008) which is aimed at improving performance within local authorities. Toolkits such as these place emphasis on human resource practices such as staff involvement in decision making and good communication. Critics argue that this takes a superficial view of culture that lacks understanding of the time required to make changes stick (Briggs, 2008).

Kanter (1983) describes two extremes of organisational culture, termed *segmentalist* and *integrative* cultures. The segmentalist culture is viewed as being resistant to change and tends to be more prevalent in organisations with

departmentalised structures that are walled off from one another. These cultures avoid experimentation, stress formal procedures and tend to compartmentalise problems. Integrative cultures, on the other hand, combine ideas from unconnected sources, look for novel solutions to problems and challenge existing practices. An important aspect of integrative cultures is that they are less focused on the means by which goals can be achieved and more focused on the relevance of the goals themselves.

It has been argued that the departmentalised nature of local government fosters a “segmentalist” culture, suggesting that councils may experience some intrinsic difficulty in accepting change (O’Donnell and Boyle, 2008). Another issue is that the public sector tends to have *strong* cultures which are deeply entrenched. As organisational cultures are anchored in tradition, they are more embedded in historical organisations with experienced workforces, such as local government. Indeed, research by Orr and Vince (2009) has attempted to diagnose the long-standing traditions of local government and associate these with the existence of different sub-cultures based on managerial and professional groupings. The outcome is that local authorities are not only considered to have tendency for “segmentalist” cultures, the cultures themselves are deeply entrenched within the organisation and therefore difficult to influence.

4.1 Organisational Culture and Mergers

Within the private sector it is often reported that mergers are problematic and fail to meet shareholder expectations (Lodorfos and Boateng, 2006). Culture is a factor that has different impacts on merger processes than other types of organisational change.

Stahl and Voigt (2008) suggest that organisational cultures evolve over time and exhibit continuous, incremental changes. However, mergers represent sudden and major change and generate a great deal of uncertainty. In most cases there is an abrupt change of management throughout the organisation. Consequently, employees find that the old ways of measuring performance and loyalty are no longer recognised. Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006) indicate that this may trigger a phenomenon termed *culture shock* which is characterised by defensive behaviour and low levels of trust across the whole organisation. The implication is that cultures operating under this climate become less willing to “unfreeze”. Cartwright and Shoenberg (2006) suggest that positive attitudes towards organisational change are associated with *intrinsic* motivation. This is where employees are “self-motivated” to change and have opportunities for autonomy and active engagement in the decision making process. On the other hand, *extrinsic* motivation is the result of external factors and is driven by the need to comply. During mergers, organisations have a tendency to tighten controls and reduce the autonomy of staff. Combined with the impact of culture shock, the result is that intrinsic motivations are replaced by extrinsic motivations, holding the old behaviours and attitudes in place.

Another issue is the cultural compatibility of the merging organisations. Most research backs the assumption that mergers become more difficult when there are greater cultural differences between organisations (see for example Buono et al., 1985; Bleigh, 2006; Stahl and Voigt, 2008). Homogenous cultures are generally considered easier to manage because there is less scope for conflict and shared cultures form the basis of trust. Cultural incompatibility can exist between apparently similar

organisations and even between internal departments of the same organisation. With reference to unitary local government, Chellel (2009) provides some anecdotal evidence of tensions between legal staff working in county and district councils, and suggests that this has the potential to upset the merger process.

4.2 Studies of Organisational Culture in Local Government

Although a good deal of research has been carried out on the subject of organisational culture and organisational change, only a handful of studies specifically address English local government, probably because many councils have not been subject to fundamental reorganisations since the 1970s when the original counties and districts were formed. Nevertheless, organisational culture is an important dimension of local government, and will therefore be influential in the formation and subsequent success of new unitary councils.

One of the most comprehensive studies of change within local government is the *Meta-Evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda*, a government sponsored project conducted by Cardiff Business School (Martin and Bovaird, 2006). The study investigated how 20 central government policies had been implemented over the period 2003-2007. Findings are mostly based on secondary data taken from government inspections and previous research on Best Value. Recent output from the project (Bovaird et al., 2009) reports that many local authorities were successful in delivering government policies but most change had been incremental rather than transformational. It is also stated that “improvements were linked to organisational culture” (Bovaird et al., 2009, p.38) although in the context of the report, organisational

culture seems to be defined as the espoused objectives of senior management. This underlines an optimistic assumption running throughout much government literature that behaviour can be directly influenced by senior management and changes to “formal” parts of the organisation.

One of the authors of the meta-evaluation study produced earlier work on the Best Value process (Martin, 1999) indicating that local authorities can be divided into three groups dependent on their organisational culture. The first of these is described as a *culture of complacency* where staff believe that change can be accommodated without major disruption to existing structures, processes and power bases. A second group have a culture of ineffective *conservatism* where staff become accustomed to short-lived initiatives and see Best Value as a “fad”. The third group have a *culture of compliance* and are used to following operational instructions from central government but are unsettled by having to take the initiative and think strategically. These classifications appear to indicate some inherent weaknesses in accepting change.

Research by Goddard (1995) examining resistance to change within local authorities compares the culture of three different organisations; a city council, a county council and a rural district council. Measuring various “dimensions” of culture through a questionnaire survey, he finds evidence of strong cultural differences between staff from different professional backgrounds. Whilst cultural differences between the three organisations are also revealed, they are not as significant as those between professions. It is suggested that the hierarchical structure of local government provided “cultural artefacts” which reinforced the more deeply held values and beliefs of the professionals. Goddard (1995) argues that managerial attempts to change structures

and processes (the artefacts) would not be radical enough to penetrate the underlying culture. Instead, he considers that it would be more worthwhile to gain a deeper understanding of the existing cultures in order to find ways of preventing future conflicts.

This has comparisons with the work of Wastell et al. (2003) who uses interviews and ethnographic techniques to investigate how the “e-government” agenda has been implemented within a local authority. This was a national programme of measures introduced to “join up” different departments through integrated IT systems. However, whilst changes to physical systems have been made, it appears that new ways of working have not been introduced. With reference to the model of organisational change developed by Lewin (1951), Wastell et al (2003) argue that the council’s staff have failed to “unfreeze” from their old ways of working. The study found that the e-government agenda is not perceived by staff as anything new or radical; instead, the change has been “neutralised and absorbed into the *status-quo*” (Wastell et al, 2003, p.6). The study suggests that the need to re-organise around the needs of the customer rather than professional disciplines is seen as a threat to the prevalent culture. Defence mechanisms have been adopted that involve departmentalising the change process so that e-government became an individual project for the customer contact points. The rest of the organisation, where the professional work is carried out, remain largely unaffected.

The work of Brooks and Bate (1994) also draws some interesting comparisons with other parts of the public sector. Their study of a newly formed agency within the civil service finds that a “cultural infrastructure” at the local level neutralises central government changes from being properly implemented. They conclude that this is a

social defence against the threat of impending change yet is not manifested as resistance, but disregard and indifference. They termed this indifference “collective blindness” which prevents those affected from recognising the significance of a major change initiative. Brooks and Bate suggest that an examination of these cultural processes reveals an inherent weakness of the top-down “invasionary” approach to change. Their findings are supported by recent research in other public sector organisations, which have found similar defensive responses. For instance, work by Morris and Farrell (2007) identifies “ambivalence” towards organisational reform by managers in ten different public sector organisations, including local government.

5. The Current Study

The creation of a single unitary council in Cornwall and the associated organisational change fits Lewin’s (1951) three-stage process of *unfreezing*, *moving*, and *re-freezing*. However, the literature suggests that the unfreezing stage is often difficult to achieve within local authorities because the prevalent cultures protect old ways of working.

This paper therefore attempts to diagnose the existing organisational cultures within Cornish local government and relate this to the propensity of organisational members to unfreeze. If managers know which aspects of organisational culture foster resistance to change, it may be possible to influence the culture to assist the change process.

There is substantial interest in the ability of local authorities to adapt to change and find new ways of working. In addition to the unitary process, which only affects some councils, there are more widespread pressures for councils to design their work structures around local priorities rather than departmental boundaries. Little empirical

research has been carried out within UK local government on the role of organisational culture in change management; consequently, this study seeks to contribute to a wider research agenda alongside helping to address a current organisational issue within CC.

5.1 Research Objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate how the organisational culture of the seven local authorities in Cornwall supports the process of merging into a single unitary council. Within this broad framework the objectives of the research are to:

- a) describe the organisational culture and readiness for change of local government in Cornwall pre-reorganisation;
- b) identify any differences in readiness for change and organisational culture between (i) the different councils, (ii) managerial and non-managerial employees and (iii) professional and non-professional employees;
- c) consider the implications of the findings on the organisational change process in local government.

The Questionnaire Survey

As organisational culture is such an intangible concept, there is substantial disagreement regarding the best way to observe it. Advocates of qualitative approaches argue that interviews and ethnographic techniques can provide a rich description of the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions which would not be achievable through any questionnaire based method. Conversely, advocates of quantitative methods argue that qualitative approaches are difficult to replicate and can

lead to inconsistencies when attempting to compare the culture of different organisations (Jung *et al.*, 2009). As the primary focus of the current study is to compare the organisational culture of different organisations a quantitative approach can be justified in this case.

Quantitative approaches are often categorised into *typing* surveys and *profiling* surveys. The former assumes that all organisational cultures can be classified into distinct “types”. One example is the *Competing Values Framework* of Cameron & Quinn (1991) which is a questionnaire based tool for grouping an organisation’s culture into four typologies. The main advantage is that it is an “off the shelf” technique which is easy to deploy and is comparable. However, critics of typing surveys point to the rigid categories and suggest that it is easy for aspects of culture to remain unnoticed. An alternative method is to conduct a “profiling survey”. These select different variables to measure (known as *dimensions* of culture) based on what is considered relevant within the organisation under investigation. The weakness of this approach is that the chosen dimensions are subject to the influence of the researcher and therefore tend to be value-laden. Nevertheless, it has been argued that when appropriate dimensions can be identified, they represent the most realistic way of undertaking comparative studies (Ankrah & Proverbs, 2009).

A questionnaire was used to assess selected “dimensions” of organisational culture, along with indicators of “perceived readiness to change”¹. The overall design was

¹ Defined as “organisational member’s beliefs, attitudes and intentions regarding the extent to which changes are needed and the organisation’s capacity to make those changes” (Cinite *et al.*, 2009, p.265).

based on a questionnaire used by Jones et al., (2005) who attempt to correlate cultural dimensions with readiness to change in the Australian public sector. The questions used to measure dimensions of culture were adapted for the UK context, and based on the work of Newman (1996) and Goddard (1995) for use within local government settings. Nine dimensions most associated with acceptance of change were selected for measurement based on Senior and Fleming (2006), Ankrah and Langford (2005) and Kanter (1983). The exact wording of the questions was modified for use in CC and partly influenced by the terminology of the *Local Government Workplace Survey* (Gould-Williams, 2004) which contains question sets previously deployed in local government.

Questions relating to perceived readiness to change were adapted from Armenakis et al. (2007). They were designed to assess staff attitudes to the forthcoming merger. Three variables were measured: *discrepancy* (belief that a need for change exists) *efficacy* (the individual feels capable of making the change) and *valence* (the attractiveness of the perceived outcome). An e-questionnaire was circulated in March 2009 to the six district councils (approximately 3,500 staff) and to the County Council departments involved in similar activities to the districts; the planning, legal, executive, treasury and committee functions (approximately 500 staff). The questions took the form of statements, and participants were asked to state if they “agreed” or “disagreed” with each statement on a seven-point Likert Scale. Respondents were also asked to confirm their managerial status and any professional institute membership to enable any hierarchical or professional differences in culture to be analysed. The dimensions measured are listed below:

AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM,

TOLERANCE OF MISTAKES

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

IDENTITY WITH WORKPLACE

DEPARTMENTAL COMMONALITY

RECOGNITION OF EFFORT

ATTITUDE TO EXPERIMENTATION

ATTITUDE TO RISK

TEAM EMPATHY

PERCEIVED READINESS TO CHANGE (DISCREPANCY)

PERCEIVED READINESS TO CHANGE (EFFICACY)

PERCEIVED READINESS TO CHANGE (VALENCE).

6. Results

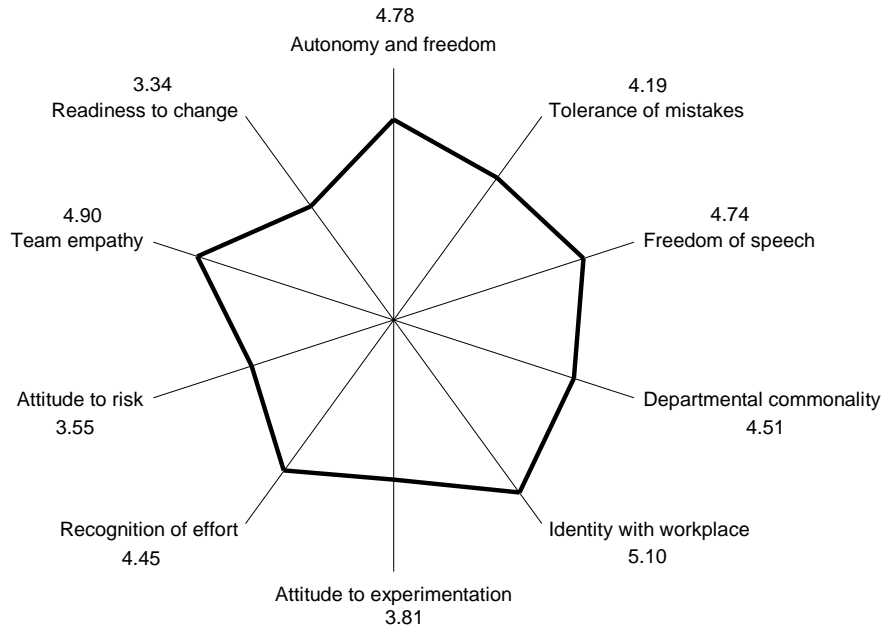
There were 760 valid responses to the questionnaire survey, which represents approximately 20% of the staff contacted. Whilst the possibility of response bias cannot be ruled out, the response rate is comparable to that achieved in similar studies. All seven organisations were strongly represented, ranging from 74 responses (Penwith) to 138 responses (County).

6.1 Overall Cultural Profile

Figure 1 shows mean scores for each “dimension of culture” in the form of a web-chart. One observation of the overall profile of interest is that the “readiness to change”

dimension has the lowest score. This may be indicative of a level of negative sentiment towards the merger into a unitary authority.

Figure 1. Mean questionnaire scores for each “dimension of culture” across all seven organisations (scores range from 1-7).



According to Mannion et al. (2009), public sector workplaces tend to have organisational cultures which are closely related to the *clan culture* typology of the Competing Values Framework. The main characteristics of clan cultures are loyalty amongst teams, respect for traditions, and emphasis on reaching consensus. Cameron and Quinn (2006, p.204) state that clan cultures are “friendly places to work where people share a lot of themselves...the organisation is like an extended family”. Although clan cultures are an extreme typology, there is perhaps some hint of these attributes within the cultural profile of Cornwall. For instance, the dimensions measuring *identity*

with the workplace and *team empathy* have the highest mean scores. Interestingly, the comparatively low score for the *attitude to risk* dimension is something the Competing Values Framework associates with *hierarchy cultures*. These are formalised workplaces which are governed by procedures and predictability. Low acceptance of risk is often associated with poor capacity to embrace change. In the context of local government, the importance of public accountability is likely to reduce propensity to take risks.

6.2 Relationships Between Dimensions

Table 1 shows the results of correlation tests between each variable measured by the questionnaire survey. Contrary to expectations, the results indicate virtually no correlation between readiness to change and any individual dimension of culture. The only statistically significant correlation is with *departmental commonality* but a coefficient of -0.16 indicates that the relationship is very weak.

Table 1. Pearson's correlation co-efficient (r) between each dimension of culture

	Autonomy and freedom	Tolerance of mistakes	Freedom of speech	Departmental commonality	Identity with workplace	Attitude to experimentation	Recognition of effort	Attitude to risk	Team empathy
Autonomy and freedom	-								
Tolerance of mistakes	0.30*	-							
Freedom of speech	0.48*	0.25*	-						
Departmental commonality	0.23*	0.06	0.26*	-					
Identity with workplace	0.39*	0.16*	0.30*	0.09*	-				
Attitude to experimentation	-0.09*	0.17*	-0.24*	-0.09*	-0.06	-			
Recognition of effort	0.39*	0.16*	0.45*	0.38*	0.16*	-0.26*	-		
Attitude to risk	-0.14*	0.03	-0.26*	-0.15*	-0.07	0.26*	-0.28*	-	
Team empathy	0.38*	0.13*	0.27*	0.16*	0.45*	-0.10*	0.29*	-0.11*	-
<i>Perceived readiness to change</i>	-0.01	0.01	-0.06	-0.16*	-0.01	-0.04	0.00	0.05	0.08

The significance of the relationship was determined by a two-tailed t-test. * $p < .05$, $n = 760$.

The statistics show that *autonomy and freedom* has the strongest positive correlations with other dimensions including *freedom of speech*, *identity with workplace*, *recognition of effort*, *team empathy* and *tolerance of mistakes*. These are all aspects of culture associated with acceptance of change (Newman, 1996). One interpretation is that increasing the autonomy of staff in Cornwall will help to develop an organisational culture that is better able to deal with the transition into a unitary council. Pepper (2010) supports the view that autonomy in the workplace is an ingredient of successful public sector organisations.

6.3 Comparisons Between Organisations

Table 2 compares the mean scores for each dimension of culture across the seven councils. The result of an ANOVA test shows that there are statistically significance differences for nearly every dimension measured. However, because the ANOVA test does not indicate which organisations are displaying significant differences, a series of t-tests were conducted between pairs of organisations to identify where the differences lie. The results of these t-tests are summarised in Table 3.

Table 2. Mean scores for each dimension of culture by organisation

	County	Caradon	Carrick	Kerrier	N.Cornwall	Penwith	Restormel	p-value
Autonomy and freedom	4.6	4.7	4.6	4.7	5.2	4.8	4.8	0.03*
Tolerance of mistakes	4.1	4.4	3.9	4.0	4.7	4.1	4.0	0.00*
Freedom of speech	4.4	4.9	4.6	4.6	5.2	4.8	4.6	0.00*
Departmental commonality	4.0	4.4	4.5	4.5	5.1	4.7	4.5	0.00*
Identity with workplace	5.3	5.2	5.0	4.8	5.3	5.0	5.0	0.02*
Attitude to experimentation	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.7	4.2	3.7	0.03*
Recognition of effort	4.3	4.3	4.0	4.7	5.0	4.4	4.3	0.00*
Attitude to risk	3.9	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.2	3.5	3.3	0.00*
Team empathy	4.9	5.0	4.7	4.7	5.2	4.9	4.9	0.06
Perceived readiness to change	4.0	3.3	3.3	3.4	2.7	3.1	3.7	0.00*

Differences between means were tested by a one-way ANOVA. * $p < .05$, $n=138$, $n=99$, $n=102$, $n=110$, $n=127$, $n=74$, $n=110$ respectively.

Table 3. Cultural dimensions that show significant differences between organisations

	County	Caradon	Carrick	Kerrier	N.Cornwall	Penwith
County						
Caradon	RC, D3, D4					
Carrick	RC, D4	D2				
Kerrier	RC, D4, D5	D5				
N.Cornwall	RC, D1, D2, D3, D4, D7, D8	RC, D1, D3, D4, D7, D8	RC, D1, D3, S4, D7, D8, D9	RC, D1, D2, D3, D4, D8, D9		
Penwith	RC, D4, D3	D6	D6, D8	RC, D5, D6	RC, D1, D2, D3, D4, D6, D7,	
Restormel	D4, D8	RC, D2	RC, D8		RC, D1, D2, D3, D4, D7	D6, RC

The table is a summary of the results of t-tests. Tables of p -values generated were from t-tests comparing the mean scores of each dimension of culture by organisation. For all values reported, $p < .05$.

Key

RC: Readiness for change

D3: Freedom of speech

D6: Attitude to experimentation

D9: Team empathy

D1: Autonomy and freedom

D4: Departmental commonality

D7: Recognition of effort

D2: Tolerance of mistakes

D5: Identity with workplace

D8: Attitude to risk

As noted earlier, mergers are generally considered easier when organisations have similar cultures. Cameron and Quinn (2006) indicate that in a *congruent* culture, the “formal” parts of the organisation such as the strategy, reward system and approach to managing employees all tend to emphasise the same set of cultural values. Having all aspects of the organisation clear and focused on the same values and sharing the same assumptions eliminates many of the complications and obstacles that can prevent effective performance. As such, cultural *incongruence* is often found to inhibit the organisation’s ability to perform at the highest levels of effectiveness. It could be argued that the observed differences between the seven councils indicate that the merger into a unitary authority will produce an incongruent culture that might not

perform as expected. However, when considering whether a culture is congruent or not, Cameron and Quinn (2006) suggest that it is important to be realistic about the scale of differences. Only organisations with markedly different and contradictory cultures are said to be truly incongruent. In actual fact, the seven councils in Cornwall are not likely to be radically different from one another. Rather, the results highlight subtle differences which whilst relevant to organisational change within Cornwall, do not necessarily signal widespread incongruence.

With reference to Table 2, North Cornwall has higher mean scores for nearly every dimension measured, and Table 3 confirms that this council shows most dissimilarity with the other organisations. In the context of the current study, higher scores indicate that the culture is more “integrative” and therefore supportive of change. This is based on the description of integrative and segmentalist cultures provided by Kanter (1983). Integrative cultures combine ideas from unconnected sources, look for novel solutions to problems and challenge existing practices. Interestingly, North Cornwall was the only local authority in Cornwall to be awarded a four-star “excellent”² rating in the government’s Comprehensive Performance Assessment (Audit Commission, 2009). Yet conversely, North Cornwall is also the organisation with the lowest “readiness to change” score, showing statistically significant differences with every other council. So whilst North Cornwall appears to have the best capacity for embracing change (at least in terms of the cultural dimensions measured), its staff are also the least ready for the transition into a new unitary council.

The County Council also shows a number of differences with the other organisations, although to a much lesser extent than North Cornwall. Relatively low

² This is the highest rating attainable on a scale of zero to four.

scores for *departmental commonality* and *freedom of speech* hint at a more formal “segmentalist” culture than North Cornwall, where workers are more likely to compartmentalise problems rather than treating them as wholes. Indeed, the physical layout of the County offices emphasises departmental boundaries, with some divisions having almost as many staff as the smallest district council (Penwith). But the most interesting feature is that the *readiness to change* score is the highest out of all the councils, showing a statistically significant difference with all but one of them. This may be due to overall cultural differences, or perhaps down to the fact that County staff did not perceive the significance of the change event because they felt less likely to be affected by it.

6.4 *Managerial vs. Non-managerial Staff*

Figure 2 and Table 4 compare mean scores between managers and the other staff. The managers are defined as being at the level of “assistant head of service” or above. These are relatively senior positions in local government and would have some responsibility for organisational strategy and line-management. In a previous study, Driscoll and Morris (2001) found evidence of “them and us” cultural differences in local authority environments. Newman (1996) says that such differences can foster resistance to change, particularly when the changes are being imposed by management.

Figure 2. Mean questionnaire scores for each “dimension of culture” between managerial staff and others (scores range from 1-7).

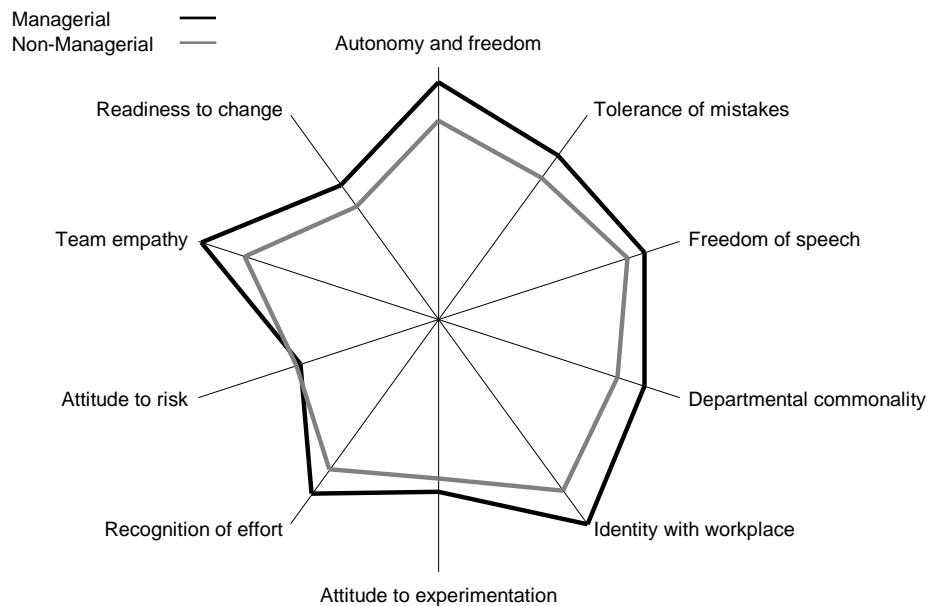


Table 4. Comparison of mean questionnaire scores between staff in managerial and non-managerial roles

Dimensions of Culture	Managerial (n=40)	Non-Managerial (n=720)	p-value
Autonomy and freedom	5.64	4.73	0.00*
Tolerance of mistakes	4.82	4.16	0.00*
Freedom of speech	5.15	4.72	0.04*
Departmental commonality	5.15	4.47	0.00*
Identity with workplace	6.03	5.04	0.00*
Attitude to experimentation	4.1	3.79	0.12
Recognition of effort	5.13	4.41	0.00*
Attitude to risk	3.44	3.55	0.61
Team empathy	5.92	4.84	0.00*
<i>Perceived readiness to change</i>	3.94	3.31	0.00*

The significance of the relationship was determined by a two-tailed t-test. * $p < .05$.

Not surprisingly, managers show significantly higher mean scores for most of the cultural dimensions measured. This may be attributed to differences in responsibility which enable a greater degree of autonomy and discretion than a typical employee.

Interestingly, the *attitude to risk* dimension is not significantly different, which may reflect

general formality within local government. Readiness to change is significantly higher in the managerial group, but still relatively low considering that these are senior managers driving the organisational change forward. The mean Likert score of 3.94 indicates an average response to the questionnaire which is not even “neutral” about the benefits of the unitary council.

6.5 *Professional vs. Non-professional Staff*

Figure 3 and Table 5 compares the mean scores between professional staff and others. The term professional is attributed to staff who are members of a professional institute or studying for membership. Newman (1996) states that professional sub-cultures may exist within local authorities where primary loyalties are to the profession rather than the organisation. Whilst the results showed professionals to have significantly higher scores across most dimensions (possibly due to lower levels of supervision and devolved working) the overall cultural profiles are similar. There is little evidence of departmental sub-cultures and lower readiness to change as suggested by the literature.

Figure 3. Mean questionnaire scores for each “dimension of culture” between professional staff and others (scores range from 1-7).

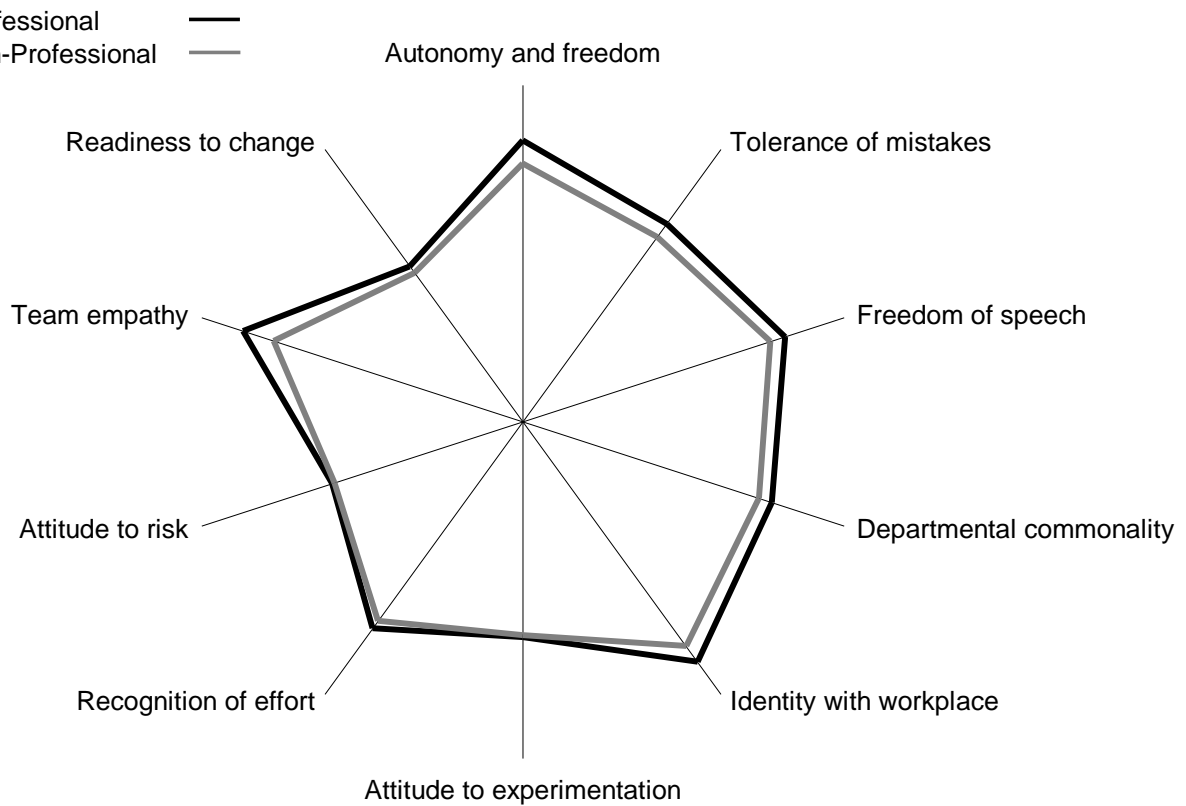


Table 5. Comparison of mean questionnaire scores between staff in professional and non-professional roles

Dimensions of Culture	Professional (n=322)	Non-Professional (n=438)	p-value
Autonomy and freedom	5.02	4.60	0.00*
Tolerance of mistakes	4.36	4.07	0.00*
Freedom of speech	4.9	4.63	0.00*
Departmental commonality	4.66	4.42	0.02*
Identity with workplace	5.29	4.95	0.00*
Attitude to experimentation	3.84	3.80	0.63
Recognition of effort	4.55	4.38	0.10
Attitude to risk	3.57	3.52	0.68
Team empathy	5.23	4.66	0.00*
<i>Perceived readiness to change</i>	3.42	3.28	0.17

The significance of the relationship was determined by a two-tailed t-test. * $p < .05$.

7. Main Findings of the Data Analysis

The main observation from the data analysis is that whilst variations exist between councils and amongst different categories of staff, pre-reorganisation readiness to change was generally low across the board, even amongst senior managers. Atkinson (2009b) argues that low readiness for change may result from insufficient focus on the unfreezing stage of Lewin's model. Lewin suggests that in order to unfreeze an organisation, three pre-conditions must be met: firstly, staff must feel that an organisational crisis is occurring that cannot be addressed by existing ways of thinking, secondly, the crisis must create a sense of anxiety, and finally, staff must seek to overcome their anxiety through tackling change. However, Brooks & Bate (1994, p.184) have suggested that the cultural infrastructure of public sector organisations "stems largely from a burning desire to control and reduce personal and collective anxiety, so that a culturally construed social defence mechanism flourishes". Consequently, the way in which staff respond to a perceived crisis within a local government setting may serve to reinforce resistance to change as a means to relieve collective anxiety. Hence whilst the formal strategies, structures and systems may be re-engineered during the 'moving' phase of Lewin's model, the failure to fully unfreeze from an organisational culture perspective may limit the ultimate success of a change programme.

Although readiness to change is generally low across the Cornish local authorities, there are some differences between organisations, with the County Council having the highest mean scores, and North Cornwall having the lowest. North Cornwall staff worked for a previously successful organisation, characterised by strong loyalty and

commitment; hence their readiness to change under these circumstances may be lower due to the lack of perceived benefits associated with moving to unitary status.

Although there is no correlation between readiness to change and any single dimension of culture, there does appear to be an overall relationship with organisational culture. In particular, North Cornwall seems to have a different cultural profile than the other organisations, and the relatively high scores for each dimension indicates a culture that should be more open to change. Yet conversely, this organisation appears most resistant to the merger into a single council. As Miller (1990) contends, past success can reinforce current ways of thinking, and thereby increase resistance to change, often to the detriment of future organisational performance. In the case of North Cornwall, it may be contended that an attitude existed that by merging with other authorities, current high standards could be eroded. Hence whilst the authority was culturally able to change, the potential outcome was seen as undesirable, leading to high levels of resistance.

8. Conclusion

This study has set out to discover if organisational culture affects the ability of CC to become a successful unitary authority. It is clear that organisational change requires a culture that supports it, but this is not a matter which is often taken into account during local government reorganisation. Pre-merger, it appears that Cornish councils had entrenched and generally congruent cultures as a consequence of their long histories. By comparing some of the outward manifestations of culture observed in the study with research conducted elsewhere, aspects of the “deeper” organisational culture can be

uncovered. Ethnographic studies, such as that carried out by Brooks and Bate (1994) seem particularly helpful in this respect.

The process of becoming a unitary authority was largely driven by central government, and implemented according to their timetable. It was the most fundamental externally imposed change experienced by these organisations for almost 40 years. The consequence of an externally imposed change on these entrenched cultures was an initial “shock” leading to increased anxiety, defensive behaviour and a low readiness to change. Although the planned reorganisation needed to progress regardless of these concerns, the underlying anxiety has the potential to interfere with the smooth implementation of the reforms. Also, studies of imposed changes elsewhere in the public sector indicate that persistence with an invasive, top-down model is likely to see reforms “neutralised” by local cultures into something more in line with the *status-quo*. This may have implications for engraining new ways of working and installing the sort of “performance culture” which the government advocates for local government authorities such as CC.

Whilst the context specific features of this study are acknowledged, the research appears to highlight the general need for organisations to “unfreeze” prior to changes being introduced. In other words, individuals will not show a high readiness to change until they are prepared to let go of their old ways of working and thinking. This is a very difficult process to achieve and requires careful management. In the current context, an emergent approach, based on local collaboration, seems the best way of embedding “second order” changes in the post-merger environment. How to best implement this in Cornwall is a challenge for management and beyond the scope of the current study.

The change management literature indicates that it is very difficult to change public sector organisations in practice, so a realistic view needs to be taken on what is achievable and what is not. However, the current upheaval represents a “trigger” for fundamental change, and should therefore be viewed as a rare opportunity to form a better organisation rather than a straightforward review of structures and procedures.

Organisational culture is just one of several factors that might influence the change process. As such, it should not be considered the answer to all of Cornwall’s problems or applied to all circumstances. However, there is no reference to culture whatsoever in the *One Cornwall Change Management Strategy*, and it is only weakly highlighted in the change management advice issued by the government (LG Improvement and Development, 2008). Intangible assets such as culture should not be ignored just because they are hard to measure or understand. Whilst an understanding of culture does not offer simple answers, it may explain why some strategies fail and others appear to work. The overall implication of the study is that the case organisation needs to develop its understanding of the way change occurs if the new unitary authority it has become is going to yield the benefits expected by government.

This study has focused purely on the impact of organisational culture on change, whereas, in reality, a more complex set of factors are governing the success or otherwise of change management programmes. However, the research does serve to highlight the critical importance of less tangible aspects of the organisation to the change process. It also demonstrates that the local authority setting is contextually very different from the environments that are typically the focus of studies of organisational change.

The study provides a comparison of variables at one point in time during a change process which, in practice, is likely to take a number of years to fully implement. In terms of further work, there is potential to carry out a longitudinal analysis to examine how both cultural dimensions and readiness to change evolve over time. The limitations of using a questionnaire based approach have been acknowledged, and there is potential to introduce qualitative approaches to supplement an understanding of the patterns shown in the existing data. The topic is likely to remain relevant as further pressure is placed on English local authorities to merge into larger organisations in order to achieve cost savings. Councils are substantial organisations with multi-million pound budgets and it is clearly in the public interest to ensure that major reorganisations, such as that experienced in Cornwall, are managed in the optimal manner possible.

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