Cross Cultural Issues in Village Administration: Observations on Water and Sanitation Operations and Management in Western Alaska

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Abstract

The villages of Western Alaska are in various stages of transition from hauling water and human waste by hand, to technologically sophisticated Arctic design piped systems. The transition involves not only technological change and adaptation, but also the development of new institutions and work relations appropriate to the administration and management of complex systems. The implicit norms of these new institutional relations and culture of work are based in Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture; in very many respects these norms are alien to traditional Yup'ik Eskimo people. Bi-cultural Natives are in a unique position to meet these challenges and facilitate the transition by modeling an adaptive synthesis of the two cultures, providing culturally sensitive leadership, and facilitating relations between villages and outside agencies.

Introduction

In recent years, local governments in rural Alaskan villages have been facing yet another sweeping transition. Governor Tony Knowles has identified village sanitation as one of the primary health and safety issues to be addressed by his administration. With Senator Ted Stevens' important role in the Appropriations Committee, federal funding has also increased. In all, over the past 25 years the state and federal governments have invested about $1 billion in water and sanitation improvement in rural Alaska, and they aim to plumb all communities by 2005. The goal, as Governor Knowles has stated is to "put the honeybucket in the museum."

Currently, about half the villages lack household plumbing. Households haul water from a central water plant, and human waste is hauled in a “honeybucket” to a dumpsite, by hand, ATV or snow machine. The conservative use of water in unplumbed homes limits washing. The inevitable spillage of raw sewage in transit is a serious public health problem.

The sheer magnitude of the technological, engineering, and fiscal challenge is daunting, and the financial burdens of operating and maintaining an arctic design water and sewer system are unprecedented in village economies, both for local governments and for households. Furthermore, the introduction of more complex water and sewer technology requires new and more complex social and administrative institutions. For example, operations and maintenance impose particularly unforgiving burdens. Failure to accurately monitor chemical treatment regimes or to regularly test water quality can result in significant and immediate public health problems. Lack of diligent maintenance during the coldest months can result in system freeze up with enormous down time and repair costs.

Alaskan villages are in various stages of this institutional transition, ranging across a spectrum from initiation to mastery. While some communities struggle with operations, maintenance, accountability, planning, and finance for the basic water plant and washeteria, others operate and manage high tech, arctic design, circulating water and vacuum sewer systems as routine, focusing their attention on the sorts of planning and finance issues that any utility faces.

Why are some communities more capable than others of operating and maintaining complex technologies and institutions? We have a large number of undeveloped hypotheses, ranging from economics, to learning time, to the variance inherent in small communities. It is clearly a complex phenomenon, with many interacting factors. In this paper we focus on the cross cultural thesis. We do not mean to suggest by this that culture is the most important factor; certainly money and opportunity for learning head the list. But cross cultural issues are a unique factor worthy of further consideration in their own terms.

Our thesis, in essence, is this: not only do individuals need to master new information and skills, but all the players must learn coordinated roles. They have different parts to play, but all from the same script. Unfortunately, they do not have a script to work from. What guidance they do have is piecemeal, conflicting, and largely written in a foreign language. The new institutional roles require patterns of relating, communication and behavior that are alien to many indigenous cultures.

Observations on Personnel Administration[1]

I have had the opportunity to review an extensive documentary record and observe water and sewer operations in a dozen villages, predominantly in Western Alaska. I was struck by two apparently common patterns: high administrative turnover and turmoil, and weak accountability and supervision of the operators.

A dramatic example of administrative turmoil is the community where the same city manager was fired four times in one year (and rehired in between). Another individual hired in the interim left after one month because he was not getting paid. A third individual was "appointed" without his knowledge or consent. The fourth individual lasted ten months. While this case is extreme, it is not isolated. Over the two year period on record, four communities out of the twelve experienced involuntary terminations of their city administrator or clerk or mayor; two of these precipitated lawsuits for wrongful termination. Three more communities experienced voluntary turnover in these positions. There is also high turnover among water and sewer operators. A tally across 101 villages found that 50 percent of utility managers and 37 percent of operators had tenures less than two years. (ANHB, 1999)

These findings are reinforced by two earlier studies. Logan (1995) surveyed 336 Alaskan city and village council clerks, asking for a five or more year history of turnover in the position, the reasons for turnover if known, and contact information for prior clerks, whom she then contacted by phone. Her preliminary results (25 percent response) identified 194 turnover events, of which 67 percent were employee initiated, 13 percent were employer initiated, two percent due to uncontrollable events, and 18 for unknown reasons. Among the employee-initiated departures, 27 percent took another job; 22 percent moved away; 21 percent quit for personal reasons or reasons of health, higher education or retirement; 15 percent due to inadequate pay or benefits; 6 percent quit because of council or staff problems; and 10 percent for unknown reasons. Logan also discussed, but did not cite, a 1992 study by Ike Waits of the Department of Community and Regional Affairs which found the average tenure of a city clerk in communities under

[1] The observations on water and sewer operations and management were Dr. Haley's contribution exclusively; the first person pronoun refers to Dr. Haley.

1000 population to be 1.9 years, compared with 4.7 years for communities over 1,000 population.

In six of the dozen villages I am familiar with, there is clear evidence in the record that the nominal supervisor of the water and sewer operators has not been actively supervising operator job performance. I believe that the pattern is even more widespread, but it is not always evident in the record when there are no serious performance problems. In my observation, the supervisor often does not know enough about water and sewer operations and maintenance (O&M) to know what the operator's job duties are supposed to be. Often there is no written job description; no preventative maintenance plan; and no routine reporting by the operator to the supervisor or council. If it does come to the supervisor's attention that there are performance problems, perhaps through citizen complaints, he or she does not know how to work with the operator to correct them. And when the operator has been advised, and warned, and still fails to improve his performance, in all too many cases the council is unwilling to take definitive action, such as suspension or firing. Reluctance to impose consequences may be because the council does not understand the seriousness of the lapses, because there is no trained alternate to take over the duties, or because the operator is a relative. It may be because it is a small community and they all have to go along to get along, or because this kind of direct criticism and action goes against their cultural sensibility of appropriate behavior. For a variety of reasons, councils often find it is just too uncomfortable to impose strict personnel management standards.

An agency employee in the region concurred with my observation that an important difference between larger communities and smaller villages is the work culture. In the smaller villages, local employment is very limited, and many positions for the local governments are seasonal and part time. As a result, people have little observation of or experience with formal personnel management, and feel uncomfortable with job accountability and supervision, from both the supervisor and the supervisee end of it. The water plant operator is hired to do the job, but there is little formal accountability. In larger communities with more of a wage economy, more people have observed conventional workplace standards in school district offices, the air taxis, the health corporations, or the tribal associations. There is more familiarity and comfort with the accountability and supervision dimensions of work. Even in a regional center, a doctor from the hospital told me that none of their Native employees are willing to take supervisory positions.

For operators and office staff, some common kinds of performance problems that show up in the record include not showing up for work when expected or not working the full schedule of paid hours. Employees are sometimes unavailable during scheduled on-call times, and sometimes take lengthy leaves of absence without explicit supervisor authorization. These issues all have to do with time and cultural norms for work. Other job performance issues concern organization, record keeping and reporting. A third theme I noted concerned taking responsibility. Four of the operators interviewed said they did not want responsibility for a new system, or did not like being responsible for the health of the whole community; it was too much responsibility and too stressful.

Cross Cultural Thesis

Among the many interrelated factors making village administration difficult, we draw particular attention to the clash of cultures and values. Financial instability in local government is important, as is the lack of training and experience with formal administrative structures. However, many of the cultural norms of Western style work and Western public administration are alien to traditional Alaska Native cultures. The discussion that follows will focus on the contrasts between Western mainstream values and those of the Yup'ik[2] societies of Western Alaska.

From its founding down to the present day, much of the dominant culture in this country derives from white Anglo-Saxon Protestant values. Work norms are based in the Protestant work ethic. In this cultural framework, work is valued well beyond its instrumental value providing a livelihood: it has intrinsic value. Diligent work is right by God; idleness is the work of the devil. Work is taken very seriously: family and personal life must support work, not interfere with it. This attitude toward work is peculiar to northern Europe and its ever widening sphere of cultural influence.

Closely related to the Protestant work ethic is a sense of duty that transcends family relationships. The ancient duty to god and king has evolved into a modern duty to employer and country (nation-state). White Anglo-Saxon culture also has its own conception of time. Time is organized strictly by the clock; punctuality is a requirement. This is more than a virtue: lack of punctuality is a vice. And while people are allowed time off on the Sabbath and a few brief holidays, in the modern context there are no seasonal variations in the structure of time.

On the surface, it would appear that the village employees described above lack diligence and a sense of personnel responsibility for their work and that supervisors are unwilling or unable to exercise the necessary authority to ensure reliable work. The impacts of absenteeism are widely noted among employers in Western Alaska, including in a carefully formulated 1987 case study of village public works employment (Lane and Thomas 1987).

In the traditional context, Yup'ik society placed great emphasis on individual autonomy and moral accountability, but this was largely conceived in a spiritual form. Each person was seen to have "awareness" and responsibility to follow the moral code of appropriate behavior, especially in relation to the spirits of the natural world. Success in hunting was conceived not simply as a matter of technical competence, but more importantly as a reflection of an enduring relationship of reciprocal generosity between a person and the spirits of animals. Respectful behavior towards animals required personal humility and diligent preparedness, but also generosity in sharing food among people, as this was a gift from the animals. Failure to act respectfully toward animals, including the integral requirement for generosity among people, would lead to hardship or worse.

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[2] Yup'ik - meaning "real person" - is the preferred term of self-designation for the Native villages from mid-Norton Sound south to Bristol Bay. It refers to the southern branch of the Eskimo language family, in contrast to Inupiaq, found to the north. In this paper, the detailed account of traditional values focuses on Yup'ik culture. Though similarities would be found in Inupiaq society, variations would also be significant, so caution must be used to avoid overgeneralizing.

Yup'ik communities valued diligence. Enduring success in hunting and excellence in craft production of clothes and implements were positively recognized, though conceived as the result of "wakefulness" or "attentiveness." Conversely, a lack of personal maturity was characterized as "sleepiness." But each individual was morally responsible for himself or herself. Others could encourage, but not compel, moral aptitude. And while individual moral autonomy was key, the precepts of generosity and attentiveness to others resulted in very strong bonds of community.

If the values of personal moral responsibility were the foundation of social order in Yup'ik society, they also gave rise to a uniquely diffuse political structure. Classically, the high degree of personal autonomy, egalitarian social relations, and the lack of directive, centralized authority, led scholars to conclude that there was no political structure and very tenuous social order among Eskimo societies. Indeed, Wendell Oswalt spoke of Western Alaskan Eskimo societies as characterized by "contained anarchy" (1963, cited in Fienup-Riordan 1990). However, important new research, conducted in collaboration with the elders of the Yupiit Nation villages, documents the subtlety of Yup'ik authority and the importance of shared cultural values in providing for social order (Fienup- Riordan 1990).

In the ecological context of traditional Yup'ik societies, extended families spent much of the year pursuing subsistence activities in remote parts of their range. Part of the year was spent in the village, where several overlapping extended families were found. Leadership was exercised in families by the elderly men and in villages by the elders cooperating together. Based in persuasion and the ability to articulate enduring values, the elders' leadership was an organizing influence primarily among kin members. Elders were recognized for their ability to instruct. They embodied Yup'ik ideals of a peaceful attitude and generosity. Leaders were seen as speaking out on behalf of the community. However, their authority was exercised in the highly personalized setting of kin group members in a local village. The legitimacy of the elders' leadership was based in shared values, not in the potential or actual use of forceful, coercive sanctions.

The manner in which elders admonished others towards appropriate behavior is also significant in the present discussion. The Yupiit Nation elders emphasized that instruction takes the form of highlighting traditional teachings, and not of shaming the transgressor. This approach is premised on the Yup'ik notion of personhood and individual autonomy. Each person has "awareness" and a fundamental responsibility to conduct his or her life with "attentiveness" and respect for traditional moral values. Instruction or correction by elders takes the form of reminding a person of the right way to do things, to help the person grow in understanding. Confrontation in which one individual follows his or her own views, rather than conforming to community ideals, are seen as dangerous. Failure to follow the moral teachings leads to supernatural risks, especially to the danger of accidental death. The elders did not act to compel--or "break the mind"--of the person who erred (Fienup-Riordan 1990). The reticent and non-confrontational Yup'ik style of communication is an important expression of cultural continuity, readily visible in the context of Village Councils and project administration.

The implications for leadership and authority in the contemporary work place are many. While Yup'ik culture has a rich tradition of personal responsibility and a diffuse, effective leadership, these attached most clearly to traditional pursuits in the context of

small, kin-based social groups. Rapid change of the late 20th century has increased year round residency in the communities at the expense of seasonal camps, and displaced traditional forms of teaching as Western schools and latter television became central influences in the lives of young people. Yup'ik communities are faced with a generation gap, with very uneven knowledge and adherence to these traditional ideals. The adaptation and innovation of these traditions in new forms of work and in new social institutions is particularly problematic.

If the traditional internalized values towards diligent effort have weakened, or do not attach to the modern workplace, but cultural norms of non-interference remain strong, then the dilemma of a supervisor is great indeed. As a result, Yup'ik people are often reluctant to take on supervisory roles in which active oversight and potentially confrontational intervention with employees is expected. In what is clearly a legacy of traditional values of autonomy and non-interference, people do not like telling others what to do, nor being told what to do. The conventional workplace norms of sharply hierarchical roles, of holding others accountable, of setting limits and imposing consequences are quite foreign.

Consider too, the contrast between an abstract set of roles and responsibilities in a structured division of labor, with the highly personalized fabric of interpersonal relations in Yup'ik communities. The impersonal distance that is the norm in western administrative, political and market relations is alien. There is no such thing as an “impersonal" or "arms length” transaction in Yup'ik culture. This makes it very difficult for the city or tribal council to set aside personal allegiances and grudges in the conduct of community business. While many of these same forces are at work in small communities everywhere, they are heightened in kin-based Yup'ik communities.

Communication norms pose another dilemma. Yup'ik culture is primarily an oral culture, with rich and subtle traditions of how to talk in ways that express the important teachings, promote community consensus, and avoid conflict between people. The Western conventions of direct and probing questions are considered intrusive and rude. The Western bureaucratic standards for written communication and documentation are alien. Filing grant reports or answering outside requests for data are very low priority, though an unhurried conversation between the people involved might easily result in the needed exchange of information. One community that did a good job completing its O&M project activities never filed the required reports. And in the course of the O&M project evaluation, all the communities were very responsive in telephone interviews, but less than a third were responsive to written questionnaires--even when they would be paid for their effort.

And finally, the dominant culture is decidedly future oriented. Planning, with a sharply linear analytic approach to creating a future different from the past, is uniquely Western. It would be misleading to suggest that traditional Yup'ik culture did not required preparedness, but this was directed at a large and fluid cycle marked by the natural seasons. One could not "plan" with bold confidence to go out to do something on a particular day. If said of hunting, this would be horribly presumptuous and lacking in humility over whether the animals would be willing to be generous. On a more practical plane, the weather might prevent the "planned" activity, or other social obligations might

require a postponement. One could be prepared, but this is very different than "planning" in the conventional sense of Western public administration.

Bicultural Leadership

One agency employee in the region offered his theory of community capacity: core leadership, consisting of one or a few capable people who sustain focus on community problem solving over the long term.[3] Stephen Cornell (1997) argues that effective bureaucracy and culturally appropriate governing institutions are basic ingredients for tribal economic development. Our theory amalgamates these by emphasizing *bicultural* leadership. Effective village leaders need not only the communication skills and work habits required for Western institutional relations, but also the listening skills, relationship skills, values and status required for legitimacy and respect in traditional cultures. From both ends of the village-agency relationship, bicultural Native people play key roles in the interface between village society and public agencies.

I asked a leader from a dynamic village how he survived the political assassination I had observed in some villages. He told me that he ignored criticism and stayed focused on results. Gradually, as results were achieved, his detractors were won over and chose to cooperate. Nothing succeeds like success. I suggest that he was able to craft and sustain this approach because he was bicultural: he was able to effectively use the western cultural norm of separating the personal and the political. Also, he was not afraid to distinguish himself from others in the community by taking a responsible role. This individual was raised in urban Alaska, but through his mother maintained strong family ties with his village; as an adult he chose to return.

I had a long conversation with an agency employee in the region and the city administrator in a village noted for its effective utility management. I complimented them on how well the city runs and asked them *why*. They both answered “good workers.” I asked *why*. I asked about the history of the community. A cannery had been there, and the village formed around it; it had since moved away. My hypothesis is that the original settlers came to work, so their descendents inherited a work culture.

In my limited range of observation, the Yup'ik village that seemed the most capable was distinctively characterized by its predominantly biracial, bicultural population. Though they also had the economic advantage of a mixed economy, I suggest that the cultural values of a bicultural population contributed to its success.

Becoming fully acculturated in two cultures requires having ties and spending time immersed in each: both village time and city time. Some individuals are raised bicultural. The offspring of bicultural marriages grow up with the cultural influence of both parents. Because historically more white men than women migrate to frontier regions, the most common bicultural pattern is individuals who acquired their Native values, skills and status from their Eskimo mother or grandmother, and their Western work habits and directness from their white father or grandfather. Other bicultural individuals were raised in the village, but successfully made the transition to an urban

high school, college or job. Still others were raised in an urban area, but maintain strong family ties to their village.

Bicultural individuals, with a foot in both worlds, sometimes do not feel at home in either. They are too Native to be white, yet too identified with the dominant culture and lifestyle to fit easily in a village. As awkward as this straddle is, the pioneering these individuals do is vital to the future of the villages. The tension between the two cultures is the impetus for a creative cultural synthesis that is critical to effective administration, self governance, and quality of life for Native people.

Conclusion

If traditional Alaska Native cultures are at odds with the cultural norms of Western public administration, and this (among other things!) is making it difficult for villages to operate and maintain community water and sewer systems, what is the resolution? There are two paths:

1. The classic solution in the history of Western civilization is for the traditional culture to give way to the dominant culture wholesale. This assimilation paradigm is likely to be unacceptable to Alaska Native peoples seeking to affirm their cultural heritage and assert their self-determination.
2. The historical Eskimo approach is technological innovation and cultural evolution, keeping traditional values intact while adopting new technologies that are useful in the village way of life.

Inventing a uniquely Eskimo blend of traditional values and tenants of western public administration adapted to the effective administration of expensive and technologically complex systems is a formidable challenge. Bicultural Natives are in a unique position to meet these challenges and facilitate the transition by modeling an adaptive synthesis of the two cultures, providing culturally sensitive leadership, and facilitating relations between villages and outside agencies.

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