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**Subject: Interview of a Communication Manager**

**I Introduction:**

For the purpose of this field research report I interviewed Betsy Clayton, a Communications Director for Lee County Government with years of experience in the Communications field, in order to discover how communications can help build an effective culture for the organization. After reaching out to Communications Managers in Alachua County via LinkedIn and not receiving any responses, I chose to use my contacts from my hometown Fort Myers, located in Lee County, Florida, resulting in my interview with Clayton. The method which I used to interview Clayton was through a telephone call with the total duration being 47:12 while I recorded the conversation on another device and took notes. During the interview we covered her extensive background and later transitioned into an in-depth conversation about her organization and current occupation. I will now give a brief description of Clayton's background based on her responses during the interview and additional material provided by her.

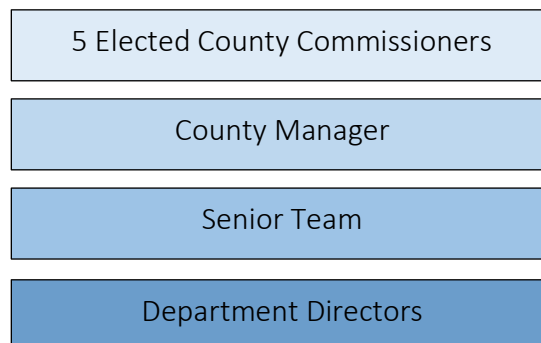
After Clayton graduated from the University of Oregon with her degree in Journalism and an emphasis for newspaper, she went on to work at a multitude of different newsrooms such as the Oregon Daily Emerald in Oregon, the News Sentinels in California, The Record also in California, and USA Today in Washington, D.C. before moving to Florida to work for the Fort Myers News-Press. After years of working in Newspapers, she realized they were decreasing in value and that's when she began shifting towards more communication centric occupations ultimately leading her to be the Communications Director for Lee County.

Clayton reports to the County Manager for an organization of 20-plus departments, a \$2.2 billion budget and 2,600 employees. Her job involves both internal and external public relations, including handling TV, radio and newspaper journalists' inquiries, public records requests and stakeholder communications. She is also the Public Information Officer for hurricanes and Emergency Operations Center activations. She works with a team of two communications specialists and an administrative specialist. She also works within the Social Media IT Communications Team where she helps edit social media products and posts while generating content for them such as news releases, videos, etc. Clayton has earned two nationally recognized professional public relations accreditations: APR - Accredited in Public Relations; and, CPRC - Certified Public Relations Counselor. In addition, she was awarded PR Professional of the Year in 2018 by Florida Public Relations Association (FPRA) Southwest Florida chapter.

## II Description:

The interview was conducted over the telephone on November 3, 2020 beginning at 11:30 a.m. and ending at 12:19 p.m., with a duration time of 47:12. Because the interview was conducted over the telephone, there were no physical observations to be made- only verbal. The purpose for conducting this interview was to answer the question: “How can communications help build an effective culture for the organization?” and also gain first-hand insight from a Communications Manager. As an undergraduate Advertising student, I found that Clayton’s responses were accurate, informative, and the interview as a whole served as an educational moment for me.

Clayton described the hierarchical structure of her organization as vertical and centralized as it has stratified layers of reporting and less decisional autonomy for lower level positions. More specifically, the first layer consists of 5 elected County Commissioners, the second is the County Manager who reports to Commissioners and oversees the Senior Team, the third is the Senior Team who oversees the Department Directors, and lastly the Department Directors who oversee all of their Department’s activities. Clayton falls within the Senior Team as previously discussed. To visualize the structure, I created a visual aid:



When asked if she could personify her organization or define its personality, Clayton stated that Lee County Government would be a reliable relative, “because a lot of people like their relatives and some people don’t like their relatives, but if you’re reliable that’s what counts.” Meaning, not everyone is fond of the government, but when the government can assist you with your critical needs it’s appreciated. She stated her organization’s main drives would be service, efficiency, and dependability.

Curious as to how she internally communicates, I also asked what her daily communication methods were when working within her immediate team of people that report to her and the Senior Team. She stated that verbal communication has proven to be the most effective in their fast environment, and when it comes to sharing information, they always use email. The insight I

gained from this was that in government communications, part of Florida Sunshine law records states that there has to be records of what is produced. More specifically, an email is typically used instead of a text because it's easier to archive emails. According to Clayton, there are certain public record laws under Statute 119 that talk about what needs to be retained as a record. I found this interesting because the private sector is not as restrained in this way. Thus, the private sector being technologically advanced as they're already beginning to use mobile platforms to communicate such as Slack and Discord while the government sector remains more traditional. Clayton stated that they continue to look for efficiencies but have to do it within the parameters of Florida State law for transparency within government. So overall, they use emails to share a lot of information due to record keeping, but when she is making decisions with her immediate team of people that report to her or the Senior Team it's usually in person. This is easy as they're all in the same area of the building.

Moving forward with the interview I asked Clayton what consequences poor communication has caused for her organization in the past. Her response was: "My job actually exists because of poor communications. When the recession hit, they had to get rid of many positions, including communications. So, there was an era where many consequences due to poor communications began happening such as a County Commissioner going to prison, another get arrested, a County Manager have some ethic violations, scandal with our EMS helicopter provider, etc. This also meant that the county used to be set up so that every Department did its own responses to stakeholders. Not every Department was on the same page 24/7 and reporters would dig for inconsistencies among Departments to make more interesting news stories." In conclusion, she stated, that "because there was no centralized communication, a lot of stuff went wrong in terms of the media coverage of the county and the public's trust in the government that was supposed to be serving them. So that's why the position I had got created."

Opposite of the last question posed, I asked what benefits strong communication has caused for her organization, and she listed benefits such as perceived transparency, improved relationships with professional media and amateur "media" and stakeholders, more informed taxpayers, seasonal residents and tourists, and the ability to effectively convey Board-policy decisions and management of operations. She also provided a good example of how her team effectively addressed rumor control, and internally showcased transparency to employees during Hurricane Irma in 2017 which can be found under the 13<sup>th</sup> question in the interview guide.

What stood out to me most was the way she described the difference between good communication and bad communication. She stated: "I would say that good communication is like good air quality. If you drive some place and get out of your car and the air quality is terrible, you're like 'Oh my gosh this place is polluted,' but if you drive somewhere where the air quality is

good you don't get out of your car and comment on the air quality like 'Oh, this place is beautiful, it's working for me.' Meaning poor communication is noticed way more quickly than good communication. So, when you're looking at internal communications, if you do them effectively, the way you know they're effective isn't necessarily because somebody calls and says 'Hey, that was some great internal communications.' It was perhaps because you addressed rumor control, you addressed a situation that then could show that there's leadership working to resolve it. Good internal communications silently addresses things that then have smaller ripple effects that are negative. The consequences of poor internal communication can either be internal or external. Back in those days I just described we would have our own employees calling news desks to report anonymous tips on what was going on in the county. I can tell you that today, employees don't do that. We work hard to be transparent and communicate well with our work force as well with our media partners, so you don't see that happening as much."

My final question was focused on how communication plays a role within her organization's culture. She stated that their culture runs off of a philosophy called 1ORG. She defined 1ORG as: "One Organization is a philosophy where the success of the organization is incumbent on people working together with a common goal of providing services to each other and our community." 1ORG's key values create the acronym P.I.T.C.H. standing for:

**Professionalism:** The practice of aligning proactive and productive behaviors with our principles. Through accountability and self-awareness, we respect and value the talents of others.

**Innovation:** Flex existing boundaries to welcome different perspectives. Support an open exchange of creative thinking without bias.

**Trust:** Trust exists at the core. Trust creates a safe environment where employees can thrive.

**Collaboration:** Two or more people working together to combine their collective wisdom and resources. Teamwork looks beyond oneself for the common good.

**Honesty:** The confidence to speak with integrity in a safe environment in which transparent communication is both encouraged and reciprocated.

### III Conclusion:

Having conducted this interview and analyzed the results, it's safe to say that communications are an essential part of every organization and act as a backbone for the culture

of the organization. As Clayton pointed out, when Communications was cut from her organization during the recession, many negative effects set in such as leaders within the organization acting unethical and corrupt, employees lacking transparency amongst one another, inconsistency among Departments, etc. which was evident to the public, resulting in not only internal issues within the organization but also, external issues. As previously mentioned, it's much easier to notice bad communications versus good communications because good internal communications silently addresses issues.

It's also evident that the efficiency of an organization's communication directly affects its culture, and the two seem to almost be intertwined. I believe it's a simple concept that when an organization has clear cut internal communication and all employees are on the same page in terms of what they value as a team, the culture just falls into place and suddenly, in this case, valuing and practicing professionalism, innovation, trust, collaboration, and honesty become second nature. Clayton provided excellent examples of what consequences happen to an organization's culture when communication is poor and what benefits are brought to an organization's culture when communication is strong- and the difference is astounding.

I found this interview to be extremely educational in the sense where I discovered many key insights that I was either unaware of or have not studied in-depth. For example, there are many differences between practicing Communications in the private sector versus within the government sector, such as government communications operating as vertical and centralized, less quick to adopt new technology due to records laws, and the use of different communication methods. Overall, the most important thing I took away from this is that an organization cannot curate an effective culture if there is not effective internal communication. This is applicable far beyond this class or assignment, and I'm eager to experience being a part of an organization's culture in the near future as I carry this information with me.

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE:**

### **BACKGROUND QUESTIONS**

1. Did you attend college or receive a higher education? If so, could you please state your:
  - College: University of Oregon
  - Major: Journalism with an emphasis on newspaper
  - Minor: Music
  - Extracurriculars: Worked at the student Newspaper, played in sympathy orchestra, and involved non-profit clubs (helped with communications), officer (reference chair) in sorority, volunteered to tutor a partially blind student in Psychology.
  - Studied abroad in Southern France at the University of Avignon
2. How long have you worked in the Communications field?

- Started at a Newsroom right out of college (June 1989) and worked in News until 2007.
  - Places of employment: Oregon Daily Emerald (Oregon), News Sentinels (California), The Record (California), worked at USA Today (Washington, D.C.) for a short time because of connections with parent company Gannett, and then moved to Florida and worked at the Fort Myers News Press.
  - Switched to Water Ways Coordinator for Lee County from 2007-2013, new position to market and turn the public's attention to the 190 mile canoe and kayak trail being built in Lee County and why they should use their facilities. "If you build it, they will come" -but they needed someone to invite travel journalists to come paddle it and write about it and do festivals for it.
  - While she was there, she realized they had a need for other communication, so she joined the Marketing Committee and began helping with brochures, was responsible for all the informative signs on the trails.
  - Freelance Copywriter, web and written content.
  - Communications Director for Lee County Government
  - Florida Public Relations Association- got certifications for Accredited Public Relations and Certified Public Relations Counselor.
3. How many jobs have you had in the Communications field?
    - 5 newspapers, 1 parks and rec job, and 2 strictly communications (copy writer and current job)
  4. What company or organization do you currently work for?
    - Lee County Government
  5. Could you please state your official job title and description?
    - Communications Director, oversees media inquiries for over 20 departments
  6. What led you to your current occupation?
    - She and her husband worked for a company owned by a parent company called Gannett. After deciding they wanted to move, they figured the chances of them both finding jobs at the same time would be higher if they stuck with the same parent company. Gannett produces annual reports of their papers each year. In the middle of the report they were looking at there was a map of the United States. A lot of circulation seemed to be happening in Florida and they wanted to live near salt-water, so they began applying to all locations on the water. The first paper to respond to them with all of their needs met was Fort Myers. After years of working in Newspapers, she realized they were decreasing in value and that's when she began shifting towards more communication centric occupations ultimately leading her to be the Communications Director for Lee County.
  7. Could you walk me through your daily tasks and responsibilities at work?

- “No day is the same.”
- There are 5 elected commissioners who the County Manager works for.
- She works for the County Manager and his Senior Level Administration Team on a daily basis. She is on the Senior Level Administration Team along with some Assistant County Managers, the CFO, and the County Manager.
- Then the 20 + Departments work under the Senior Level Administration Team.
- \$2.2 billion budget and 2,600 employees.
- She specifically handles internal and external public relations. She and her small team handle radio, TV, newspaper, blogger, (journalism inquiries), public record requests from stakeholders and media, stakeholder communications (different groups of people who have an interest of what’s going on at the time)
- She and her small team are also a part of a larger team called Social Media IT Communications Team where they help edit social media products and posts and generate content for them, ex: news releases, videos, scripts, etc.
- She is also the Public Information Officer for hurricanes and Emergency Operations Center activations. Helps to run press conferences.

## ORGANIZATION QUESTIONS

8. Can you briefly describe the hierarchical structure of your organization?
  - 5 elected County Commissioners
  - County Manager- reports to Commissioners and oversees Senior Team
  - Senior Team- over sees the Department Directors
  - Department Directors- over sees all of their Department’s activities
9. Is your organization more vertical and centralized (stratified layers of reporting and less decisional autonomy for lower level positions) or horizontal and decentralized (stratification levels of employees are spread out and many employees have decisional autonomy)?
  - Vertical and centralized.
  - Within departments people have operational autonomy, but over-all most Government occupations are vertical and centralized.
10. How would you describe your organization’s culture or “personality”?
  - There to serve the public in a calm and efficient way.
  - Service, Efficiency, and Dependability, overall there to provide critical needs.
  - Personified as a reliable relative “because a lot of people like their relatives and some people don’t like their relatives, but if you’re reliable that’s what counts.”

11. How do you communicate to your peers on a daily basis?

- A lot of verbal communication is used for primary communication, super effective in our world because things change fast and being able to talk really quick is important.
- Emails to share information, in government part of Florida Sunshine law records means there has to be records of what is produced. In government, an email is typically used instead of a text because it's typically easier to archive emails. There are certain public record laws under Statute 119 that talks about what needs to be retained as a record.
- In conclusion, they use emails to share a lot of information, but when they're talking about or deciding what they'd like to do (her immediate team of people that report to her and Senior Team) it's usually in person. They're all in the same area of the building.
- Media always uses cell phone.
- When communicating to the County Commissioners they often times make power points.
- Government entities work different- they are always behind on technology when compared to the private sector. They have to be very careful.
- When they use new platforms, they have to ensure that we're meeting the state statutes for record retention and creation of records.
- The pandemic is beginning to steer government in that direction, Zoom for example is now used.
- They don't use new platforms such as Slack.
- They continue to look for efficiencies, but just have to do it within the parameters of Florida State law for transparency in government.
- Florida of all the 50 states has some of the broadest public record laws of all of them in terms of what is available to the public.

12. What consequences has poor communication caused for your organization?

- "My job actually exists because of poor communications."
- "When the recession hit, they had to get rid of many positions, including communications. So, there was an era where many consequences due to poor communications began happening such as a County Commissioner going to prison, another get arrested, a County Manager have some ethics violations, scandal with our EMS helicopter provider, etc."
- "This also meant that the county used to be set up so that every Department did its own responses to stakeholders. Not every Department was on the same page 24/7 and reporters would dig for inconsistencies among Departments to make more interesting news stories."



- “Because there was no centralized communication, a lot of stuff went wrong in terms of the media coverage of the county and the public’s trust in the government that was supposed to be serving them. So that’s why the position I have got created.”
- “I would say that good communication is like good air quality. If you drive some place and get out of your car and the air quality is terrible, you’re like ‘Oh my gosh this place is polluted,’ but if you drive somewhere where the air quality is good you don’t get out of your car and comment on the air quality like ‘Oh, this place is beautiful it’s working for me.’ So poor communication is noticed way more quickly than good communications. So, when you’re looking at internal communications, if you do them effectively, the way you know they’re effective isn’t necessarily because somebody calls and says ‘Hey, that was some great internal communications.’ It was perhaps because you addressed rumor control, you addressed a situation that then could show that there’s leadership working to resolve it. Good internal communications silently addresses things that then have smaller ripple effects that are negative. The consequences of poor internal communication can either be internal or external. Back in those days I just described we would have our own employees calling news desks to report anonymous tips on what was going on in the county. I can tell you that today, employees don’t do that. We work hard to be transparent and communicate well with our work force as well as with our media partners, so you don’t see that happening as much.”

13. What benefits has strong communication caused for your organization?

- Improved relationships with professional media, amateur “media” and stakeholders
- More informed taxpayers, seasonal residents and tourists
- Effectively convey Board-policy decisions and management of operations
- EX: Hurricane Irma 2017, the emergency center was activated. The number one task my team and I were trying to tackle was rumor control. When people are waiting for a hurricane, they become anxious, decide whether they want to stay or leave, talk to their neighbors, etc. In addition to setting up press conferences to push out messaging, someone was assigned to monitor social media posts and someone who would call the news desk and let them know if they receive a tip on this false information that it’s not actually true. They would watch the national news to make sure it was aligning with local news. She would gather “tipping point people” which she defined as the individuals within communities that people go to for information because they’re found as credible. They could then help to spread

accurate information. This was external, but the internal communication came in when we were sharing information with our employees and stakeholders.

- Internally, transparency was emphasized, and employees were very well informed so they didn't need to rely on mainstream media.

14. How does communication play a role in your organization's culture?

- We have 1ORG
- "One Organization is a philosophy where the success of the organization is incumbent on people working together with a common goal of providing services to each other and our community."
- P.I.T.C.H.
  - Professionalism: The practice of aligning proactive and productive behaviors with our principles. Through accountability and self-awareness, we respect and value the talents of others.
  - Innovation: Flex existing boundaries to welcome different perspectives. Support an open exchange of creative thinking without bias.
  - Trust: Trust exists at the core. Trust creates a safe environment where employees can thrive.
  - Collaboration: Two or more people working together to combine their collective wisdom and resources. Teamwork looks beyond oneself for the common good.
  - Honesty: The confidence to speak with integrity in a safe environment in which transparent communication is both encouraged and reciprocated.