

43

The Ordeal of Change

Alex Stone was an aggressive and determined young man with a drive to get things done quickly and efficiently. He had received a bachelor's and then a master's degree in public administration with a major in city management from a large Midwestern university. Upon receiving his second degree at the age of twenty-three and having been selected by the department as one of the most promising graduates, he turned to the network of earlier graduates known as the "True Connection" for assistance in getting a job. The alumni helped him obtain his first position as assistant city manager in Plainview, a city of about 100,000 population.

The city manager of Plainview was Frank Bartels, a member of the True Connection, who demanded much of his assistant but who took pains to teach him his job. In Plainview, Stone displayed his managerial talents best in municipal finance, job classification, and organization. He was respected rather than liked by employees, and he realized this. He never pretended to be a good politician, he would say, and preferred to leave the politicking and public relations to Bartels.

After five years as assistant city manager, Stone realized he had come to a dead end insofar as his own advancement in Plainview was concerned. He discussed his prospects with Bartels, who advised him to "strike out for his own city." Taking stock of his own assets and liabilities, Stone decided that Bartels was right. He realized that he had made some mistakes but he thought these were canceled by the recognition he had received for tasks expeditiously performed in Plainview.

Stone, as one would expect from his character, began his job search in a practical way. He prepared a comprehensive resume, passed the word among the True Connection and notified the job-placement office of his alma mater that he was looking for a new position and answered advertisements in the city-management and public-administration publications. But jobs were scarce in the central part of the state, where he hoped to locate. He did not, however, rule out going further afield. Finally, after several disappointments, he learned of an ideal opening in Sparta, a city in

the state with a population of 175,000, that offered a salary of \$52,000. With strong references from Bartels and Professor John McGee, the chairman of his graduate committee, and the support of the True Connection, Stone was invited to Sparta for interviews with the mayor, City Council members, and the city manager. These interviews went well, and an offer was quickly extended. Stone was elated and told Bartels on his departure from Plainview that he looked forward "to calling the shots from City Hall."

Stone found his first weeks on the job exciting. City officials, elective and appointive, were friendly and informative about municipal affairs and they welcomed a dynamic young administrator whom they thought likely to solve long-standing problems, some of which, Stone discovered, were acute. These did not worry him. He accepted the challenge of solving them, convinced that he would register his personal imprint on the city with a more efficiently operated government.

Singling out the personnel system for his first close examination, Stone asked for a summary profile of all employees and for a copy of all personnel policies, rules, and regulations. He was initially most interested in the system of job classification and pay, an area that he felt his knowledge and experience especially had prepared him to tackle.

After spending hours studying the reports, Stone discovered many disparities in job classification and many inequities in pay. The problem, he decided, was that the system, in operation for twenty-five years, had not been basically overhauled to meet the needs of a government that had assumed new services and responsibilities in recent years of rapid growth. Instead of being incorporated into the basic scheme, new classifications were added so that there was a multiplicity of them. In effect, Stone concluded, the generalizations and flexibility necessary for an adequate position classification had led to abuses within each "job family" or those jobs that were alike in the work performed and the skills needed for the required tasks. He decided, also, that misuse of seniority in making job assignments had played a part in the disparities he found in the system.

Because of the complexity of the problem, Stone felt that an outside evaluation of the personnel system by a management firm should be conducted. He submitted a request for proposal (RFP) to Public Management Consultants, a privately owned and locally based firm. It proposed that the position-classification system be examined through desk audits so that jobs could be properly grouped on the basis of job-related characteristics that pertained to satisfactory work performance.

The evaluation required two months. The report stated that "confusion is the only standard operating in the present classification system." It suggested a new hierarchical arrangement of positions based on the knowledge required, supervision given and received, complexity of the work performed, scope and effort of the tasks, physical demands of the work, and personal

contacts and their purposes. Stone sent copies of the report to councilmembers and recommended its adoption. After a brief discussion of the report at a regular meeting, the council approved it by a vote of 4 to 1.

The next day Stone sent copies of the report to the director of personnel and the heads of line departments with a memo ordering them to implement the new classification system as quickly as possible. He stated that the new plan would bring about major changes in office arrangements, power and pay hierarchies, and office accountability.

City employees had been aware of the study being conducted of the classification system, but they had no idea of its extent until now. They reacted with fear and resentment. Those who held positions that would be reclassified were upset because generally they had become accustomed to doing things in certain ways and dreaded the uncertainty of new conditions. Some complained that the reclassification scheme would produce new inequities. In brief, they preferred following familiar paths to embarking on new ones.

At a meeting the department heads told Stone that implementation of the new system was encountering difficulties. Some of the more outspoken declared it would cause more problems than it would solve. Stone was shocked. He could not understand why a system worked out so carefully to introduce efficiency and economy into city operations and to correct inequities in work assignments and pay could meet with such opposition. Reform, he discovered, was easier to propose than to effect.