



Criminalistics Section - 2016

B204 Three Roads Converge: The Formation of the Houston Forensic Science Center

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The goal of this presentation is to share best practices and lessons learned with other forensic science centers as they consider the pursuit of independence. This presentation's conclusions will also assist more traditionally structured forensic science centers as they adapt to shifting requirements, changing legislation, and an increasing demand for objectivity, quality, and timeliness of services.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the roles that culture, communication, leadership, and employee engagement play in the formation of a new forensic entity. Attendees will be able to replicate this approach for their own organizations to more effectively manage their changes.

The Houston Forensic Science Center (HFSC) was established in 2012 as a Texas local government corporation whose purpose is to provide the City of Houston and the surrounding region with independent forensic services. In 2014, HFSC took over control and management of the Houston Police Department's (HPD) Crime Lab, Crime Scene Unit, and parts of the Identification Division. This is the first significant transition in the United States in which a traditional extension of law enforcement reorganizes into an independent forensic body committed to sound business practice, scientific rigor, and strong performance orientation.

Subsequently, this also created a unique set of circumstances which generated substantial risk for failure. In practice, three of the riskiest activities are mergers/acquisitions, large organizational change, and significant culture shift. HFSC's formation contained elements of all three. Three separate systems converged: HPD classified officers, City of Houston (COH) civilian employees, and HFSC's newly hired employees. Personnel from the two established systems (HPD and COH) had strong cultures, long institutional memory, and a degree of uncertainty, sometimes even skepticism, about the new company. HFSC employees were new arrivals, largely joining after the company's formation and entering the ranks alongside HPD and COH workers. The three groups have differing benefit packages, labor contracts, promotion channels, performance systems, and management structures.

This presentation is offered as a case study on how to mitigate the risk of this type of organizational change, while using the diverse backgrounds and differing cultures to build strength and capability. Engaged management, open and ongoing communications, a workforce involved in the change, and a thorough examination of the culture needed for success had the greatest impacts on the process.

Organizational research suggests engaged management is critical to mitigate the risk of major change and culture shift. HFSC's board of directors is a balanced governing body that ensures the Center's objectivity and independence. The internal management and leadership team reflects the diversity of the company's three separate "feeder systems." Finally, HFSC's organizational structure is designed around eight forensic disciplines: firearms, controlled substances, biology, latent prints, digital, audio/video, toxicology, and crime scene, each with strong leadership.

For the new venture to succeed, both the legacy workforces and the new hires have to buy into the required organizational change and culture shift. The cornerstone is a shared vision to serve the justice system through independent, objective science, coupled with active and open communications. This included frequent company meetings to distribute information and solicit feedback, strong intra-discipline communication and a single-platform Information Technologies (IT) system. Further, staff were instrumental in the change process, participating in committees focused on planning, quality, and human resources.

Ultimately, all change must be firmly rooted in culture to have long-term viability and sustainability. Tools to measure the necessary culture for HFSC's success were developed to monitor, adjust, and shape the change and progress. This includes key cultural dimensions mapped onto "as-is" and "should-be" frameworks. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through focus groups, individual interviews, observational assessment (including crime scene ride-alongs), and surveys. Initial qualitative analysis identified keywords, concepts, and themes resulting in six broad values and 25 markers. The six values are professionalism, business focus, teamwork, agility, stewardship, and ethics. Subsequent quantitative collection and analysis allowed for the comparison of the culture that currently exists within HFSC and its ideal culture. These results then form the basis for allocation of attention, resources, and effort to areas that will have the greatest impact on culture shift.

Incorporation, Independence, Culture

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