

Culture of state government changing



Hannah Hoffman, Statesman Journal 7:29 a.m. PDT June 16, 2014



(Photo: Thomas Patterson
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Imagine a child named Gordon. He is born in McMinnville in 1990 to working class parents. He enrolls in elementary school in 1995, and this is the first time the State of Oregon meets Gordon. They discover he has a good grasp on his letters but isn't fabulous with numbers. He likes recess, but he sometimes comes to school without breakfast and is prone to head colds.

In 1995, this is where the state would have started with Gordon. The school would place him in a higher reading class and a lower math class and work from there. He would likely be on the free-or-reduced lunch program and maybe start having breakfast at school, and his teacher might mention to his mother that he seems sniffly all the time. Is it a lingering sinus infection? Does he have allergies? Does she or someone else smoke in the home? The teacher likely won't know.

Now imagine Gordon born today.

He will go to kindergarten in 2019, and it will not be the first time the State of Oregon meets him. Gordon will have been under the supervision of the Yamhill Early Learning Hub since birth, and the state will already know him.

The "learning hubs" are the local presence of the Early Learning Council, which is responsible for implementing Gov. John Kitzhaber's "40-40-20" education plan for children ages 0 to 5.

The Yamhill Hub will have paid attention to Gordon, noting that his family's income is well below the median. It will have helped the family access the WIC program or a non profit that can help with meals, and it will have coordinated with the Oregon Health Authority to make sure Gordon has a good pediatrician to address that stuffy nose.

It will make sure Gordon has access to some education before kindergarten, and it will record the fact that his verbal skills are stronger than his math. It will coordinate a variety of services to make sure Gordon is ready for kindergarten when he gets there.

And now all my readers are wondering, "Wait, isn't this the state workers column?"

Yes, it is.

My little story about Gordon is meant to illustrate how much state government has changed over the past 25 years. Once upon a time, each agency worked alone, more or less.

Today, Oregon has several programs like the Early Learning Council that emphasize collaboration and cross-agency coordination. Multiple agencies work together for one child, and agencies work with the community to fill in gaps state government can't fill.

All of this means the culture of state government is going to change.

Department of Administrative Services Director Michael Jordan believes collaboration has become "the gold standard" for state employees and agencies. It is crucial in a world that is changing.

Jordan has launched a massive overhaul of the state's human resources system to reflect the state's changing need in its human capital. On a fundamental level, the state's values need to change, he said.

It will need workers who can collaborate, who can use a "holistic" approach to achieving goals, he said. "That implies to me that we need different skill sets...people with an inherently different value system," Jordan said.

Kitzhaber agrees.

"Collaboration and breaking down silos is a centerpiece of this governor's work. He believes — and leads by example — that the way to best create more third grade readers, family wage jobs, balanced approaches to using and conserving our natural resources, and truly moving our state forward is to work collaboratively," said Chief of Staff Mike Bonetto.

That's going to require very different employees than the ones who may have worked for the state 20 years ago, Jordan said.

Gone are the days of agencies working alone.

Jordan said it's going to be a long process to change the way the state hires, trains and develops its employees. It will require employees' help in defining the values of the new state government, and it will require acceptance of the idea that the State of Oregon is one employer, not dozens of individual employers with their own cultures.

Kitzhaber has the same vision for the state.

"(He) is focused on pulling down barriers between agencies, holding them accountable for results and using resources effectively, and bringing state government closer to the people we serve," Bonetto said.

That's going to be hard to change, he said. However, shared values are crucial to creating an effective and productive work environment, he said, and they're more important than skills.

"I can teach an employee almost any skills, but I can't teach them values," Jordan said.

This overhaul of the human resources system will mean a lot of changes. There will be changes to job descriptions, classifications, maybe even pay. The way workers are evaluated will change. The way they're trained will change. Goals will change.

However, none of this can be done if the employees don't believe in the changes, Jordan said.

"You really do have to build this thing from the ground up," he said.

In other words: Michael Jordan expects every employee to collaborate on this project.

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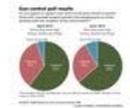
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