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FINANCE

Collaboration leads the Anoka County Finance Team to Success

BY KATIE LUDWIG

As Cory Kampf describes it, he and his financial leadership team in Anoka County, Minnesota, have been on a “journey of change together” since he joined the county as Finance and Central Services Division manager in October 2014. The team’s focus on creating an organizational culture of collaboration and empowerment in order to develop better, more efficient ways of doing things is showing great signs of success and has enabled it to adapt to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anoka County’s financial leadership team, led by Cory, also includes Accounting Directors Paula Bownik and Brenda Pavelich-Beck. Paula has been with the county for 16 years and oversees grants, accounts receivable,

and cash receipting, along with the technical operations staff for the Financial and Central Services Division. Brenda has been with Anoka County for 23 years and manages payroll, the general ledger, accounts payable, debt services, fixed assets, and the development of the comprehensive annual financial report. Rounding out the team is Budget Manager Yvonne Kirkeide, who has 15 years of government experience as well as experience in the nonprofit industry. She is responsible for developing the operations budget, the capital improvement budget, and the capital equipment budget, as well as internal and external reporting and managing contracts.

Before she worked for the county, Brenda worked in private industry and

said that it was a “real change” coming to the public sector. “One of the things that I’ve always liked about working here is I’ve never been bored,” she said. “And I can tell you the last six years since Cory has been here, we haven’t had the chance to be bored, for sure.”

“I’ve got four things on my board that I wrote in 2015 that have stayed there since then,” Cory said. They are:

1. Streamline processes
2. Engage within our department
3. Engage with others outside our department
4. Collaborative team environment

These four priority areas are at the core of the work the Finance and Central Services Division does, and they have helped inform the development of its mission, vision, and values. Cory explained that shortly before he started with the county, the Financial Services and Central Services departments had been combined. “My goal was to sit down and listen to everybody, understand where they’re coming from, understand how we can put this together and what this team did,” he said.

One of his first goals was to work with the leadership team to develop a mission, vision, and set of values for the new department. “We found after a couple meetings that we were horrible at trying to come up with a decision on how to do it as a group,” he said. “So, I told everybody, ‘Go back, find a staff member, somebody who’s not in the leadership team.’” The leadership team appointed seven staff members to develop the mission, vision, and values for the new department. The group met over eight weeks and with feedback from the leadership team developed the mission, vision, and values for the department. (See Exhibit 1.)

The group agreed that the exercise of developing the mission, vision, and values played a big role in bringing people together and creating a more collaborative work environment.

“If you look into the values statement, one of them is empowerment,” Cory said.

“I think empowerment is a key part of collaboration, where we listen, but we also empower people to become leaders and to do good work, and to just grow and become whatever they can be, whatever they want to be.”

Cory explained that another thing that has reinforced the collaborative culture in the Finance and Central Services Division is the Moomba Committee. “Moomba is an Australian Aboriginal term that means to get together and have fun,” he said, adding that anyone

“Empowerment is a key part of collaboration. We listen, but we also help people to do good work, grow, become whatever they can be and want to be. **We empower people to become leaders.**”

– Cory Kampf, Anoka County Finance and Central Services Division Manager

can join the committee, which plans fun activities to help staff connect. This includes regular staff luncheons, quarterly birthday celebrations, an annual picnic, and holiday charity drives. Cory acknowledged that the committee can’t use county dollars for these purposes. He explained that the leadership team contributed start-up funds for the committee and that the committee members have found ways to make money, including bake sales or popcorn sales.

The Moomba Committee’s activities have continued despite the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, though they have changed somewhat. Staff enjoyed playing bingo via email, and since they can’t get together for

birthdays, the committee has done “birthday trivia.” For example, one month the committee created a game that required players to match the staff celebrating a birthday that month to their first car.

“These are some of the things that have been done in COVID to help keep people engaged. The whole purpose of that was to create this engagement, which I think helps drive us toward collaboration,” said Cory.

As the ongoing work of the Moomba Committee demonstrates, having fun and engaging with colleagues socially is definitely a priority for the Finance and Central Services Division—but as Brenda explained, leadership team members have also taken steps to encourage more interaction and collaboration in their everyday work. This is keeping in line with the #2 priority on Cory’s whiteboard: “Engage within our department.”

“When we were merging these two departments together...we had a lot of duplication of efforts,” she said. “As we were working through that, and trying to get everybody to play together, for lack of a better term right now, we started holding some meetings.” She explained that each of the teams had their own meetings, but an important step was to start holding meetings for all of the accounting staff in finance, regardless of which specific team they work on. Brenda believes this relatively simple change has had a positive impact on the staff.

“They know that they can go talk to other people instead of just coming to directors or managers to ask for the answers. They’re working with each other, and that continues, and it has blossomed lately,” she said.

Brenda acknowledged that sometimes employees need a bit of nudging to work together. “I will sometimes assign two people on something so that they have to work together. If they’re extremely quiet, then it kind of gets them to start working together, and they have different skill sets, so they can help one another in how they’re approaching it.”

In order to collaborate better with other departments, the team has developed what it calls “the accountant model” for the Finance and Central Services Division.

“We were two separate departments; we merged together, and then Cory came on board, so there were a lot of things that had happened in a short amount of time,” Paula said. “And so we had to figure out how we wanted our organization to look and what we wanted our accountants to do.”

Paula further explained that the department has 12 accountants, and after the merger, she, Brenda, and Cory got together to take a closer look at what those accountants were doing. “They had something in common, but they were also doing different things. And so we came up with a model that they’re all relatively consistent in what they do. One of the key aspects of that expectation or the job description is really engaging with our departments. Every single accountant has departments that they work with, and so we’re trying as a finance division to be a partner with the department.”

This approach seems to be working. “Department staff are more likely to reach out to us, to either the AP department or to their accountant directly to say, ‘Hey, can you help me out? Can we figure this out together?’ I think that’s been successful, and we continue to make progress with the departments and really assert ourselves as a partner with those departments.”

Cory further explained that this “accountant model” benefits both the finance division and the departments because “as the accountant gets to know their departments, they’re going to understand how to advocate for their departments and how to help their departments through financial situations, and then even help message where they need to go as they’re making changes or having questions.”

He said the hope is that this collaborative approach also starts to break down silos between the departments.

Exhibit 1 | Anoka County Finance & Central Services Division Mission, Vision and Values



“We’re not the ‘Department of No’; we’re the department of ‘yes, we want to work with you.’ Maybe it’s not going to be the way you think it should be, but maybe there’s another path through and we’ll help you find that,” he explained.

Keeping in line with the idea of engaging more with the departments, Yvonne described one way the Finance and Central Services Division has adapted its budget practices over time. “One of the things that we realized is that we go through and we have the departments put these budgets together and everything, but then we don’t follow back up with them,” she said. “We didn’t follow back up with them and tell them what the results were or what the commissioners said or give them feedback on where we are ending up. In the springtime, we always were good about kicking off a budget process, so now we do a budget wrap-up meeting in the fall.”

At the wrap-up meeting, Finance debriefs the department on the plan for their budget for the upcoming year and answers any questions they may have. Yvonne explained that the budget

team decided this was an important step to strengthen engagement with the departments. “The departments have been very pleased with it and appreciative of that communication back and forth,” she said.

Finance instituted another change to the budget process in recent years, Cory said, explaining that each department would go before its committee to present its budget. (The county has committees that oversee different areas of operations—for example, the Finance Committee, the Property Tax Committee, the Human Services Committee—and county board members sit on the various committees.)

“One of the things we noticed is that there was never a common way of approaching the budget,” Cory said. “So, we created a themed PowerPoint over a couple of years ago, and we use it so we have the same approach to the commissioners. The commissioners have really appreciated this because I think it helps them frame a better understanding of our overall budget and what’s going on throughout each department.”



The Anoka County financial leadership team, from left: Cory Kampf, Paula Bownik, Yvonne Kirkeide and Brenda Pavelich-Beck.

“We’ve done a lot of projects...a lot of process improvement, a lot of technology upgrades, technology enhancements,” Paula said. One example is automating the procurement card and employee expense reimbursement process. “That’s all electronic now. We’re not shuffling paper back and forth,” she said, and the authorization and payment process is much easier as a result. “That really involved, obviously, engaging with the departments to figure out what they were doing, standardizing what they were doing, messaging and communication with our IT department up to county admin, and all the way around the county.”

The team identified several projects and initiatives that were put on a fast track as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One of the things that we had started working on is trying to find a more efficient way to handle the accounts payable, the invoices coming in,” Brenda said, explaining that they were piloting the new process with one department when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Before that, the department had reached out to the Accounts Payable (AP) team because its courier position had been eliminated. This courier

would shuttle invoices and other mail back and forth to the Finance and Central Services Division’s offices. Once the department reached out, they sat down with the AP team and brainstormed together to design a new process that works for everyone.

“We did a fast forward to make sure all of the invoices are now being scanned and emailed to the AP department... They’ve got all the necessary coding and signatures on there,” she said. The AP staff receive the scanned invoices via email, enter them into the enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, and attach the scanned image to the record in the ERP system.

“It was something that we had started. We were hoping to move in that direction...but COVID just accelerated the implementation,” Brenda said. She believes the new process is working well for everyone. “We don’t have to worry about courier services. We don’t have to worry about things getting lost on somebody’s desk.”

Cory explained that the General Operations team within the Finance and Central Services Division has also stepped up its collaboration efforts during the pandemic. Because this team

has to be onsite to answer phones and maintain front desk operations, members have helped with other onsite roles so that more people can work remotely. As an example, they have started scanning invoices, which allows the AP team to work remotely.

Paula said another project that is in fast-forward mode because of the pandemic is the transition away from printing checks in-house. She said this was something that Cory had been pushing since he came on board and that the county had made steps in this direction but didn’t move to outsourcing check printing fully until the pandemic hit.

She pointed out that this is another project where collaboration with the departments is key because many of them have very specific expectations about how and when payments are made. As a result, this project has involved in-depth discussions to reeducate colleagues and arrive at a compromise that will work for all stakeholders.

Paula explained that collaboration has also been a key to the County’s success in managing its Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding. Finance developed a form that a department must fill out to request CARES Act funding, sometimes asking their accountant for help. A multi-disciplinary team, known as the “CARES Act Team,” reviews the requests to determine if the request is an appropriate use of funds and to ensure that federal procurement rules are being followed. “I think that’s a really good example of why collaboration works. If we were doing that in a vacuum, we’d be in a lot of trouble,” she said.

“The CARES Act team meets once a week, and all these requests that came through on the forms get looked at and approved by this multi-jurisdictional team,” Cory added. “We have two county board

liaisons that feed into the team. The county administrator talks with them to make sure there are no political issues.”

Cory explained how this process forms the basis for reporting back to the county board. “Based on this, we have a one-page sheet that has our CARES budget and just where we’re at in the budget process, and we update that weekly. I actually provided it to all of the commissioners at a budget workshop this morning. They loved it, they loved seeing it, and so we’re going to continue to provide that because it gives them a snapshot,” he said.

“COVID has really changed the way that we collaborate,” Paula said. “I think we were fortunate, as an organization. We all had laptops. We bought headphones and some monitors for people to have them work more effectively at home, but for me, personally, collaborating is much more intentional now than it has been in the past.” She explained that she used to be able to drop by a colleague’s desk to ask a quick question, or she might run into someone in the lunchroom and have a quick conversation about a project they are working on. With so many staff members working remotely now, these unplanned interactions don’t happen anymore. “We’re fortunate that we have tools to be able to see each other, engage that way, and have group meetings and that kind of thing. But I think remote work has made collaboration difficult. Now, ask me in a year and a half, and I might say, ‘Oh, it’s not difficult. It’s just the way it is.’ But for me right now, it’s still not normal.”

“We’re looking at changing our service models, and I think it’s a little bit unnerving in some cases, but it’s really given us a chance to grow,” Cory said. He believes local governments will face continuing pressure to innovate in order to serve their constituents better, and support departments like his need to be a part of that innovation. “How can we in accounting be innovative to help meet customer needs, and in finance, how are we supporting our departments to head toward that innovation?”

“I think there are a lot of people mourning the loss of what was, and people are

at different places on whether they’re mourning still, or whether they’re embracing some of the new challenges or opportunities that might be laid before them,” Cory said. “I think there are a number of our staff that are really liking the work from home—it’s creating a little more work-life balance, where they can spend more time with their family, and what we’ve noticed is we’re not losing productivity necessarily. They feel like they can actually get more stuff done because they’re not as interrupted.”

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– Brenda Pavelich-Beck,
Anoka County Accounting Director

Yvonne believes the focus on empowering staff definitely helps in times like this. “One of the things that I think has been very helpful in order for staff to cope with some of this change is to have that empowerment,” she said. “Being able to have leadership and management empower us to think outside the box and to come up with some really great ideas on how to make this process different, and to really look at things and being challenged to relook at things and to find those new ways of doing things and knowing that you’re not going to just get the answer, ‘No, we’ve always done it that way’—that is also I think, very empowering for staff.”

The focus on questioning the current state of things, combined with the focus on collaboration, results in better outcomes for the Finance and

Central Services Division, Cory said. He explained how sometimes when he presents a new idea to Brenda, Paula, or Yvonne, their initial reaction might be less than enthusiastic, but they are willing to mull it over and give him honest feedback.

“He’s been thinking about it for two days, and then he comes and drops it on me, and I’m supposed to say, ‘Hey, that sounds really fun, right?’” Brenda mused. “You need to back off a little bit and think about it, and think it through, and then we can reach something that works for everybody.”

“It’s fun to drop a bomb on them, but of course, they have permission to throw darts back and look at it differently,” Cory said. “So, I don’t always get my way, so to speak, but we get different lenses looking at it, which means, I think, it’s the better product at the end of the day.”

Brenda agreed and explained that this is by design, not by accident. “We really do have a unique culture here within our division, and we do have a lot of fun, as Cory mentioned with Moomba. But we respect one another and what knowledge they have and what they can bring to the table—we’ve worked at that. We’ve worked at making that culture for both employees and the leadership team, and we’re starting to see real benefits,” Brenda said.

Cory also explained that this focus on innovation and collaboration has influenced the Finance and Central Services Division’s approach to recruiting staff. He described how many government finance departments require a certain number of years of experience in government service and specific knowledge of government accounting. But rather than focusing on these somewhat arbitrary requirements, he prefers to focus on finding someone who has the basic technical knowledge and who also is a good fit with the stated mission, vision, and values of the department. “We’re looking for people who are curious and like to ask why,” he said. ■

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