THE COMMITMENT GAP: LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT IN THE PARKS CANADA AGENCY

Dawn E. Carr[1] and Paul F. Eagles[2]

[1] *1117 5th Avenue, Calgary, Ontario, T2N 0R7, dawn@alumni.uwaterloo.ca*
[2] *University of Waterloo, Recreation and Leisure Studies, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3G1 Email: eagles@healthy.uwaterloo.ca*

SUMMARY
Understanding how committed employees are within an organization is a valuable tool for managing and fostering a successful work environment. A continued appreciation of employee commitment is especially beneficial following organizational change as it has been shown that change inevitably impacts commitment levels to some degree. This study investigated organizational commitment within a subpopulation of the newly restructured Parks Canada Agency using an established survey instrument. The results of this study were based upon a 62.6% response rate from a population of 300 employees in the Ontario region. The findings revealed that an employee's tenure and work location influences commitment levels among the sample that was surveyed. This study also found that a commitment gap exists between the expressed commitment to the current state of the organization and commitment toward the mandate. An effort to improve the moderate levels of organizational commitment would reduce the commitment gap and enhance the employer-employee relationship. Six lessons for maintaining employee commitment within a protected area organization are learned from the Parks Canada experience and their adoption would contribute to the positive effects of the organizational change.

1. PARKS CANADA AND A DECADE OF CHANGE

The passage of the Parks Canada Agency Act in 1998 marked a fundamental change in the management and operating structure of Parks Canada (1). Prior to 1998, Parks Canada had always been a federal program, which historically served a host of federal departments, most recently the Department of Canadian Heritage. When it officially became an Agency of the federal government it remained affiliated with the Department of Canadian Heritage, however, it earned several new defining characteristics. The drastic changes that ensued necessitated years of preparation and planning, in addition to years of implementation and adjustment. This study tells the story of organizational change through the lens of employee commitment among a sample of Parks Canada employees.

1.1 A Brief Synopsis of Parks Canada's Restructuring

In the early 1990s the federal government moved to create more and more alternative service delivery (ASD) mechanisms to cope with increasing financial constraints (2). The Parks program was largely viewed as a suitable candidate for such a transition following the federal government's Program Review initiative of 1994. This initiative set out a framework of six tests for assessing not only whether programs were being delivered effectively, but also whether the federal government should be delivering them at all (3). The agency design represents an extension of the government's foray into ASD and, more generally in the comparative literature, the new public management (NPM) (4). ASD can be defined as a systematic emphasis on streamlining and consolidation of operations, cost effectiveness, and enhanced responsiveness to client needs. In the Canadian government context it has been described as selecting the best means of delivery to achieve government objectives consistent with the values of Canadians as citizens, clients and taxpayers (5). An overriding characteristic of such initiatives by governments, whether under the labels of Program

Review, ASD or NPM, is an effort to focus on core responsibilities and to draw a clear distinction between policy and operational responsibilities. An important means of giving effect to such values has been to give agencies much greater autonomy – and responsibility – for managing their service delivery or operational mandates.

The new organizational structure for Parks Canada that materialized was introduced during the federal budget of March 1996 (6). At this time, it was announced that an agency status would be established to "provide better services to Canadians and visitors through simplified human resource and administrative rules and more flexible financial authorities" (7). This structural transformation was not a simple reorganization, it was a major undertaking. In addition to numerous operational changes, new legislation needed to be written in order to create and provide a parks agency with the authority and tools required to implement and manage a new course of existence.

Two years following the initial agency announcement the Secretary of State (Parks) Andy Mitchell, on behalf of the Canadian Heritage Minister Sheila Copps, introduced the proposed legislation on February 5, 1998 to establish the new Canadian Parks Agency (8). The new legislation outlined the proposed changes that would occur as a result of agency status. Furthermore, it was created with the direction and advice of all actively interested parties, as Canadians and relevant groups were able to take part in two rounds of public consultations (9). By December 21, 1998 the Parks Canada Agency became a reality with Proclamation and appointment of the first Chief Executive Officer – Mr. Tom Lee (10).

One of the most important characteristics attributed to the new Parks Canada Agency is that it continued to embrace its long-standing mandate as well as the *Guiding Principles and Operational Policies* that were developed in 1994. The mandate of Parks Canada states, "On behalf of the people of Canada, we protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations" (11). The *Guiding Principles and Operational Policies* document (12) is described as:

> a comprehensive statement of broad principles that gives direction to both present programs and future initiatives of Parks Canada. It provides a framework for the delivery of heritage programs and for responsible management decisions that reflect the national interest while being sensitive to local considerations. (p. 7)

The philosophical ideology of Parks Canada is engraved within these two articles and they are both practical applications and symbolic representations of the kind of organization Parks Canada prides itself to be.

Following the inauguration of the Parks Canada Agency, reorganization proceeded which involved major changes to the human resource management regime, governing framework, management framework, accountability mechanisms, financing and administrative management (13, 14, 15). By the time this study was conducted in 2002, all of these significant changes had taken place and employees were in a position to reflect upon their experience and to indicate their commitment to the new organizational structure and management regime.

1.2 Organizational Change and Employee Commitment

It is now widely accepted that any organizational change inevitably has some sort of impact on all those affected by the organization. Indeed, to facilitate successful change it is asserted that reformers must take into account how these changes will be perceived by the employees (16). This is undoubtedly a challenging task for any organization whether public, private, or

non-profit; however, the greater the size of the organization the more difficult the challenge will be. For example, the total employment size of the Parks Canada Agency at the onset of change was approximately 5000 people (17). In order to understand the various concerns, expectations, hopes, and fears that employees across the country may have it is necessary to recognize the importance of field managers and to incorporate a micro-management perspective into a macro-oriented operation.

The impact of organizational change is not a uniform experience for all employees. In many cases a shift in organizational structure change be extremely exhilarating for some, but it can also cause confusion, low morale, turnover and decreased productivity (18). It has also been shown that one of the most devastating effects of a structural change can occur when the nature of the relationship between the employee and the employer is damaged (19). Other notable effects include reduced job satisfaction and distrust (20), a decline in motivation (21,22), absenteeism (23,24), health (25), union issues and job insecurity (26). All of these effects whether acting independently or collectively, have an enormous influence on organizational commitment. Many believe that maintaining and fostering commitment among employees during a period of radical change can greatly contribute to the speed and ease of the reform (27,28,29). Organizational commitment is often defined as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization and if that association is positive, it is a powerful agent for both employers and employees because it generates high levels of personal and professional satisfaction and increased productivity (30). If commitment levels are not monitored, nurtured or considered an important factor within an organization adverse managerial effects can result.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

At the heel of the organization change that occurred within the Parks Canada Agency, this study developed a twofold purpose that emerged from discussions with Parks Canada personnel. At the time, there was much discussion about the changes among employees; however, independent research had not been conducted to provide managers with concrete evidence about employee reactions to the new structure. Such information, it was anticipated, could help guide communication and resolve unfounded discrepancies. In response to this practical proposal the dual purpose was to: 1) gain insight into the current state of organizational commitment among Parks Canada employees, and 2) develop a greater understanding of the issues currently affecting organizational commitment within the Agency.

The research design was purposefully exploratory because little research had previously been conducted that investigated commitment issues in organizations with a conservation mandate. While employees have been overtly recognized within protected areas to be the sites' valued ambassadors and they are uncontested as essential components to its success (31), there are no studies that have measured commitment levels in protected areas following a significant organizational change. This research endeavour sought to elucidate lessons that could be learned through exploring organizational commitment specifically within a protected area organization.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study invited 300 employees from the Eastern Ontario Field Unit and Ontario Service Centres of the Parks Canada Agency to participate in the research. The limited sample size reflects the approved terms of reference permitted by the Parks Canada Executive Board and by virtue of the narrowly defined sampling frame it is recognized that the results are not necessarily applicable to other employment regions within the Agency. This case study approach does however, enable a highly specialized understanding of commitment issues

within a subpopulation and broad lessons can be learned and used as benchmark for future research.

2.1 Defining the Sample and Survey Distribution Approach

The Eastern Ontario Field Unit (EOFU) is comprised of one National Park, three Historic Sites and the historic Rideau Canal. There were 146 people employed within this Field Unit during the data collection period. The Ontario Service Centre (OSC) includes four offices; three of which are in Ottawa, while the largest is located in Cornwall. At these locations 154 potential participants were employed during the distribution period. The types of job positions and roles differ significantly among the locations enabling a diverse pool of participants to respond to the survey.

A single-stage census sampling procedure was applied to the study and all 300 employees within the sampling frame were asked to participate. The sample itself derived from those employees who chose to participate. At each location surveys were distributed and explained in person and employees completed and submitted the surveys the same day. In cases where employees could not complete the survey on the day of distribution a postage paid envelope was provided.
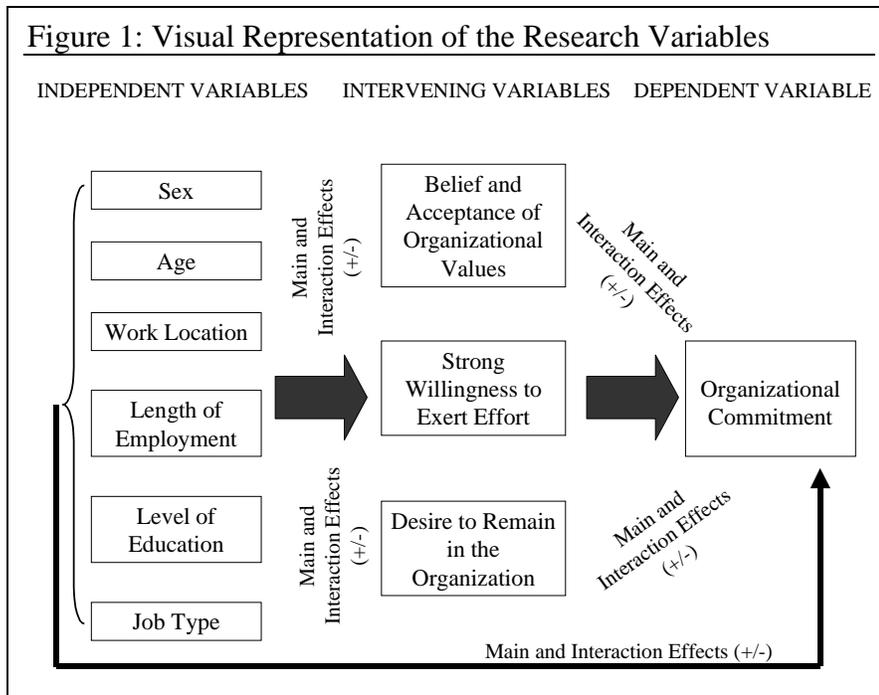
2.2 Instrumentation and Analysis

The survey that was distributed included a participant information section, an established organizational commitment survey instrument, and a comment section. The first component asked participants to indicate relevant demographic attributes and work characteristics such as sex, age, length of employment and job type. These factors represented the independent variables in the study. The intervening and dependent variables were measured using the 15-question Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Mowday, Porter and Steers (32). This instrument has been used extensively throughout the past two decades and has proven to be a valid and reliable method for measuring organizational commitment. In addition to the OCQ, two questions were included to measure commitment levels to the Parks Canada mandate. These questions were phrased similarly to the OCQ items and were measured using the OCQ's 7-point scale. The final feature of the survey was an open-ended comment section for participants to share further opinions toward issues of organizational commitment.

The relationships that were tested are illustrated in Figure 1. The independent variables were measured using a variety of categorical and numeric questions and the intervening and dependent variables, which operationalize the organizational commitment definition, were measured using the OCQ. Other than the anticipated direct relationships between the independent, intervening and dependent variables (illustrated by the solid arrows), it was expected that there might be interaction effects between each of the different variable types.

3. FINDINGS

The results of this study are based on a 62.6% overall response rate. When assessing the EOFU and OSC separately, it is shown that the EOFU had a lower response rate than the OSC (49.3% and 75.3% consecutively). The former response rate is due, in large part, to a greater percentage of participants not responding from the Rideau Canal (37.2%) as compared to the other sites. The cause of this disparity may be due to the large number of seasonal staff who was invited to participate at this location. Overall, the response characteristics for this study enable a high degree of confidence to be place in the results because they represent the views of a substantial proportion of the people who work within the sample.

Figure 1: Visual Representation of the Research Variables

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES   INTERVENING VARIABLES   DEPENDENT VARIABLE

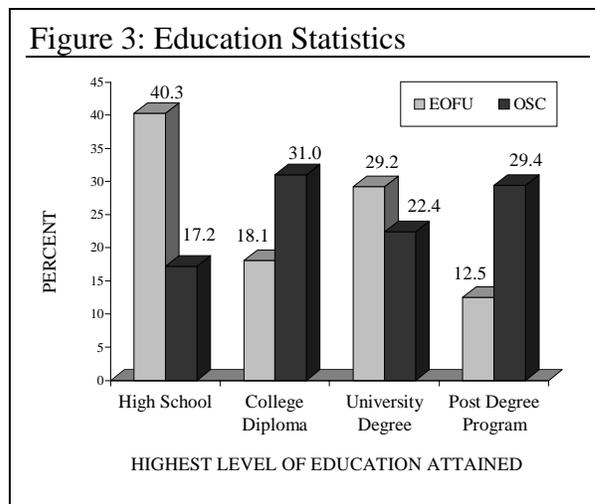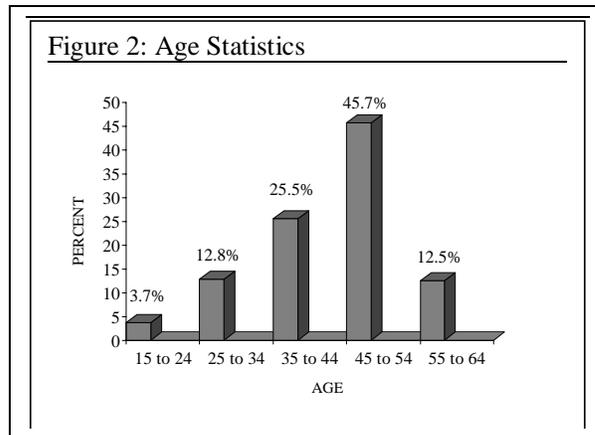| Independent Variables	Main and Interaction Effects (+/-)	Intervening Variables	Main and Interaction Effects (+/-)	Dependent Variable
Sex		Belief and Acceptance of Organizational Values		
Age				
Work Location				
Length of Employment	→	Strong Willingness to Exert Effort	→	Organizational Commitment
Level of Education		Desire to Remain in the Organization		
Job Type				

Main and Interaction Effects (+/-)

The profile of the sample is unique compared to most organizations and is worth describing in some detail. In both the overall sample and in each participating subpopulation (OSC and EOFU), more males participated in the survey than females with an average disparity of 15%. One of the most interesting items was the age variable which is illustrated in Figure 2. The most frequent age category is between 45 and 54 years of age. Moreover, almost 60% of the sample is reaching a retirement age and there appears to be fewer experienced employees to fill their positions from within the Agency.

Another important finding relates to the amount of education the sample had achieved. Figure 3 illustrates the education statistics which signify that all employees who participated had achieved at least a high school diploma. The variation in academic achievement is noteworthy, especially when considering the 29.4% of respondents from the OSC that have completed more education above and beyond a university degree. The significance of this statistic is clear when compared to the 1996 Canadian Census information that indicates only 13% of Canadians had attained a bachelor degree and just 4% had completed an educational level above a bachelor degree (33).

A work location variable was created by segmenting the sample into three relatively equal categories: the EOFU (38.2% of the sample); the Cornwall Service Centre office (36.2% of the sample); and the Ottawa Service Centre offices (25.6% of the sample). In order to maintain anonymity among the respondents, revealing more precise work locations was not considered an option.

The mean length of employment reported by the participants in the study was 16.25 years. This is a surprising figure when considering only 25.8% of the employees surveyed had worked for less than 10 years compared with 24.8% who have worked for Parks Canada for over 25 years. These numbers reflect an overall employee base that has an extensive amount of experience within Parks Canada.

Figure 2: Age Statistics

AGE	PERCENT
15 to 24	3.7%
25 to 34	12.8%
35 to 44	25.5%
45 to 54	45.7%
55 to 64	12.5%

Figure 3: Education Statistics

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION ATTAINED	EOFU	OSC
High School	40.3	17.2
College Diploma	18.1	31.0
University Degree	29.2	22.4
Post Degree Program	12.5	29.4

The relationships between the personal and work characteristics and the commitment variables reveal a situation that has been termed the commitment gap. This phenomenon first developed through an analysis of the OCQ followed by an examination of the questions pertaining to an employee's commitment to the mandate. At the time the data was collected employees demonstrated a slightly positive commitment orientation to the management of the Agency, yet they were considerably more committed to the Agency mandate. The descriptive results of each variable are shown in Table 1. The summary indicator scores represent the mean total (on a 7-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree) for the questions that encompassed each variable. The fourth point on the scale was described as "neither disagree nor agree" on the survey.

Table 1: Summary Indicator Scores

Variables	Summary Indicator Score
Belief and acceptance of organizational values (I)	4.57
• Commitment to the mandate	6.06
Strong willingness to exert effort (I)	4.50
Desire to remain in the organization (I)	4.56
Organizational commitment score (D)	4.54

Note: The intervening variables (I) and the dependent variable (D) are based on a maximum score of 7 and a minimum score of 1.

Almost half (49.5%) of the respondents accepted the opportunity to explain some of the issues that were affecting their commitment to the Agency in the comment section. Of the 93 people who contributed, a total of 169 distinct categorical comments were shared, which averaged 1.8 comments per contributor. All of the comments fell into seven broad categories: (a) Mandate Issues; (b) Human Resources Issues; (c) Organizational Change Issues; (d) Perceptions of Senior Management; (e) Policy Issues; (f) Job-specific Issues; and (g) Survey Issues. These comments strengthen an understanding of the specific issues that are affecting organizational commitment and what is most telling is that over half of the comments fell into the 'perceptions of senior management' category (51.5%). In fact, 94.6% of all respondents shared comments that directly related to this category. The smallest category of comments, which highlights the significance of the commitment gap, pertained to issues surrounding the mandate (2% of responses).

The inferential statistics confirmed the suspected pattern of disconnect between commitment to the mandate and commitment to the organization. Using simple linear regression the two variables, segmented by work location, were analyzed to identify if a significant difference existed. The results of this investigation are illustrated in Figure 4 which shows the profound difference between commitment to the mandate and commitment


Figure 4: Commitment Gap between Organizational Commitment and Commitment to the Agency Mandate by Work Location
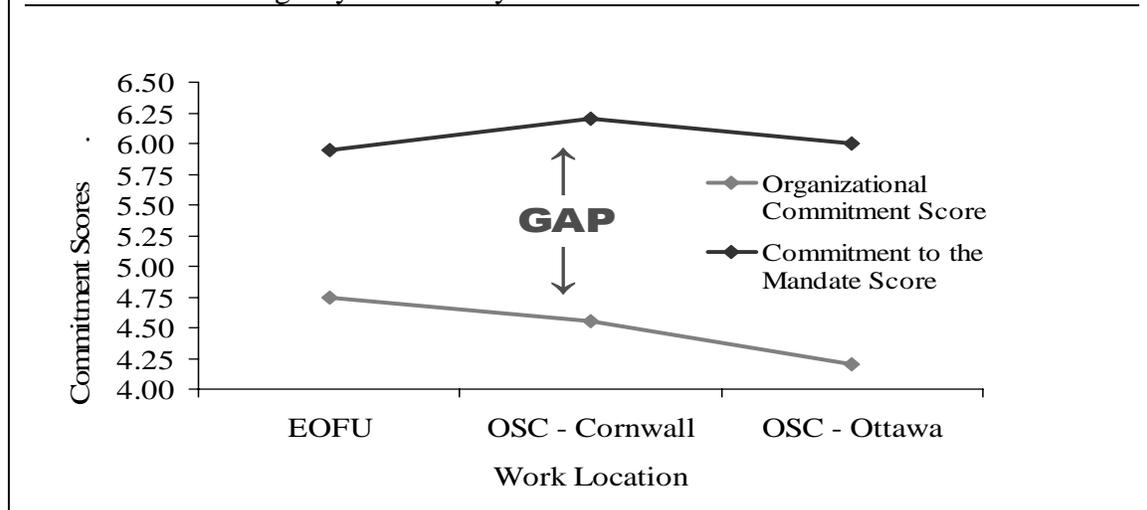
to the current state of the organization as reported at different work location (p = <.001). Although a large gap is apparent at all locations, it is accentuated in the Ottawa offices of the Ontario Service Centre.

Other findings that help to shed light on why this relationship exists are captured by the demographic and work characteristics when they are compared with the commitment variables. During this analysis it was found that the highest commitment scores reported toward the mandate were expressed by employees who have worked the longest within the organization, whereas the same employees were among those who reported the lowest organizational commitment scores. This shows that the employees who have the most tenure within the organization are also the most dedicated to the mandate; however, they are the least committed to the current state of the organization (Figure 5).

When examining the relationship between the organizational commitment score and the three defined work locations it is discovered that there are significant differences in how the organization is perceived. Further analysis depicted two homogeneous subsets among the work location variable that grouped the Cornwall Service Centre office with the EOFU. The organizational commitment score for the Ottawa Service Centre offices were significantly lower than both the Cornwall office (p=.027) and the EOFU (p=.007).

Figure 5: Means Plot for Length of Employment and Organizational Commitment
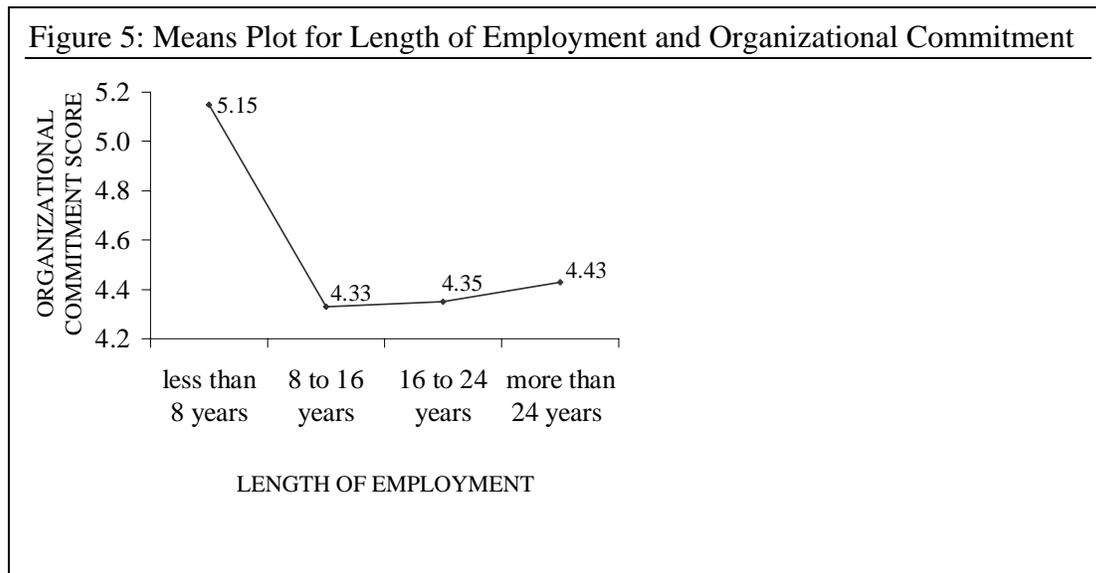
4. DISCUSSION

The experience of organizational change is a process that all protected area managers go through at one time or another. It is not something that should be feared; on the contrary, it is something that should be fostered in order to continuously improve management practices. This research endeavour has highlighted the value of understanding how organizational change affects employees. This is meaningful because they are, possibly, the most important single factor in ensuring the successful management of protected areas. If employees are strongly committed to the mandate but are not highly committed to the management of the organization, then a coordinated approach to effective protected area management is not practicable. Reducing the commitment gap by raising organizational commitment toward the commitment level stated for the mandate will undoubtedly improve the organizational effectiveness of the Parks Canada Agency. This outcome will also help to mitigate the

numerous negative consequences of poor organizational commitment including high turnover rates, lower productivity, distrust for management and job insecurity.

4.1 Lessons Learned for Protected Area Managers

There are six lessons that protected area managers can learn from this study on employee commitment. These lessons are broadly drawn from the specific implications raised in the case study conducted in the eastern Ontario subpopulation of the Parks Canada Agency.

1   Fundamentally, protected area organizations attract employees who have a strong environmental and/or cultural ethic, which must be fostered;

2   Although employees may disagree with the management of the organization, they stay because of their commitment to and belief in the mandate;

3   Honest communication, and lots of it, is vital during periods of organizational stress and will reduce animosity towards management;

4   Commitment must be fostered differently among new and experienced employees because their organizational perspectives are unavoidably dissimilar;

5   The work environments that endure the most stress are often those with the least organizational commitment – save those who experience positive relationships with decision-makers; and

6   Monitor organizational commitment levels regularly in order to recognize change, whether positive or negative, especially before, during and after a period of transition.

These six lessons may appear overly simplistic and pragmatic. On the contrary, they are incredibly difficult to uphold on a day-to-day basis, especially within a large organization. The first lesson is the most valuable. By acknowledging, recognizing and encouraging the uniqueness that exists within the protected area domain the commitment gap between a site's mandate and the management will be significantly reduced.

REFERENCES

1.   Government of Canada. 1998. Parks Canada Agency Act. Ottawa, ON: Author.
2.   B. A. Rockman. 1998. The Changing Role of the State. In B. G. Peters and D. Savoie, Eds. Taking Stock: Assessing Public Sector Reforms. pp. 20-42. Ottawa and Montreal: Canadian Centre for Management Development/McGill-Queens Press.
3.   Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. 2002. Report of the Independent Review Panel on Modern Comptrollership in the Government of Canada: A Chronology of Key Events. Retrieved May 1, 2003, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/cmo_ mfc/Intro2/ origin_e.asp.
4.   P. Aucoin. 1990. Administrative Reform in Public Management: Paradigms, Principles, Paradoxes and Pendulums. Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration, 3 (1), pp. 115-137.
5.   E. A. Lindquist. 1996. On the Cutting Edge: Program Review, Government Restructuring, and the Tressury Board of Canada. In G. Swimmer, Ed., pp. 205-252. How Ottawa Spends 1996-1997. Ottawa, ON: Carleton University Press.
6.   Ibid.
7.   B. Anthony. 1998, August-September. Parks Canada Stands Alone. The Beaver, pp. 2-3.
8.   Government of Canada. 1998. Parks Canada to Become a Federal Agency. (News Release No. P-02/98-146). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Heritage.
9.   Ibid.
10.   Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. 2002. Parks Canada Profile. Retrieved May 1, 2003, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rma/dpr/01-02/parks/PC0102dpr03_e.asp.
11.   Parks Canada Agency. 2003. Parks Canada Agency: Parks Canada's Mandate. Retrieved May 1, 2003, http://www.parkscanada.gc.ca/agen/index_E.asp
12.   Parks Canada. 1994. Parks Canada Guiding Principles and Operational Policies. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Heritage.
13.   Government of Canada. (1998). Summary of the Canadian Parks Agency Legislation. Unpublished.

14. Government of Canada. 1998. Parks Canada Agency Employee Information Kit: A Road Map to Transition. (Available from the Parks Canada Agency, Human Resources, 25 Eddy Street, Hull, QC, K1A 0M5).
15. Government of Canada. 1998. Parks Canada Agency Act. Ottawa, ON: Author.
16. D. G. Frederickson & J. L. Perry. 1998. Overcoming employee resistence to change. In P. W. Ingraham, J. R. Thompson, & R. P. Sanders, Eds. Transforming Government: Lessons form the Reinvention Laboratories. pp. 125-146. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
17. Government of Canada. 1998. Parks Canada Agency Employee Information Kit: A Road Map to Transition. (Available from the Parks Canada Agency, Human Resources, 25 Eddy Street, Hull, QC, K1A 0M5).
18. D. St. Amour. 2000. Navigating through Organizational Change. CMA Management, 74, 5, 16-17.
19. L. Worrall, C. L. Cooper & F. Campbell-Jamison. 2000. The impact of organizational change on the work experiences and perceptions of public sector managers. Personnel Review, 29, 5, 613-636.
20. T. S. Bateman, & S. Strasser. 1984. A longitudinal analysis of the antecedents of organizational commitment. Academy of Management Journal, 27, 95-112
21. R. T. Mowday, L. W. Porter & R. M. Steers. 1982. Employee-organization linkages: The psychology of commitment, absenteeism and turnover. New York, NY: Academic Press.
22. H. Bennett & M. Durkin. 2000. The effects of organisational change on employee psychological attachment: An exploratory study. Journal of Managerial Psychology, 15, 2, 126-147.
23. R. T. Mowday, L. W. Porter & R. M. Steers. 1982. Employee-organization linkages: The psychology of commitment, absenteeism and turnover. New York, NY: Academic Press.
24. C. W. Clegg. 1983. Psychology of employee lateness, absence and turnover: A methodological critique and an empirical study. Journal of Applied Psychology, 68, 1, 88-101.
25. T. M. Begley, & J. M. Czajka. 1993. Panel analysis of the moderating effects of commitment on job satisfaction, intent to quit, and health following organizational change. Journal of Applied Psychology, 78, 4, 552-556.
26. L. Worrall, C. L. Cooper & F. Campbell-Jamison. 2000. The impact of organizational change on the work experiences and perceptions of public sector managers. Personnel Review, 29, 5, 613-636.
27. T. M. Begley, & J. M. Czajka. 1993. Panel analysis of the moderating effects of commitment on job satisfaction, intent to quit, and health following organizational change. Journal of Applied Psychology, 78, 4, 552-556.
28. W. J. Nijhof, M. J. de Jong & G. Beukhof. 1998. Employee commitment in changing organisations: An exploration. Journal of European Industrial Training, 22, 6, 243-248.
29. D. St. Amour. 2000. Navigating through Organizational Change. CMA Management, 74, 5, 16-17.
30. W. J. Nijhof, M. J. de Jong & G. Beukhof. 1998. Employee commitment in changing organisations: An exploration. Journal of European Industrial Training, 22, 6, 243-248.
31. P. F. J. Eagles, S. F. McCool, & C. D. Haynes. (2002). Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas: Guidelines for Planning and Management. In A. Phillips, Ed. Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series, No. 8. Gland, Switzerland: The World Conservation Union.
32. R. T. Mowday, L. W. Porter, & R. M. Steers. 1979. The measurement of organizational commitment. Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 14, 224-247.
33. Statistics Canada. (1996). Population 15 years and over by highest level of education, 1996 Census. Retrieved May 1, 2003, http://www.statcan.ca/english/ Pgdb/educ43a.htm