

Creating a Healthy Workplace Culture

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Introduction

Vancouver Airport Authority manages and operates the Vancouver International Airport (YVR). The airport is operated under the provision of a long term lease with the Government of Canada. All excess of revenue over expenditures is re-invested in the business of the airport. YVR is Canada's second busiest airport, with an estimated 16.4 million passengers, 223,100 tons of cargo and 278,500 aircraft movements in 2005. The airport is located 12 kilometers south of the Vancouver central business district, on Sea Island in the City of Richmond.

The Authority has eight core business objectives. The first one is "Keeping Safety, Security and Environmental Excellence as Its # 1 Priority". The Authority has been recognized many times for its achievements in creating a healthy and safe workplace, namely:

- 1999 and 2001 by The Canadian Society for Safety Engineering for having the best safety program for organizations 50 to 500 staff
- In 2003, the Canadian Labour and Business Centre recognized the Authority as one of the top ten healthy workplaces in Canada
- In 2004 the BC Society of Psychologists awarded the Authority the Psychological Healthy Workplace Award for having one of the healthiest workplace in British Columbia.

Good safety is not about programs and regulations but about people, and their relationship with the workplace. This paper provides an insight into the journey and thought process adopted by the Airport Authority, and explains the model they created which links research in the areas of human resources, behavioral and safety.

Background

Twenty-five years of research into organizational effectiveness points to the conclusion that too many organizational and workplace factors directly contribute to poor safety and health, and lowered productivity. In general, these factors can be linked to the quality of leadership and management practices, work climate and culture, work processes, and promotion activities

existing in the workplace. Fostering a healthy and safe organization requires comprehensive strategies. We know that in some combinations:

- High demand
- Low support
- Poor involvement and
- Low reward

Predict we will have:

- Dissatisfaction
- Ergonomic injuries
- Drug abuse
- Commitment
- Decline in health and
- Cardio-vascular disease

Leading to:

- Low collaboration
- Absenteeism
- More accidents
- Higher turnover
- Poor engagement
- Poorer productivity and
- Customer dissatisfaction.

The solution to reducing accidents and injuries for the Authority did not lie within the last bullet cluster; but in the first bullet cluster. High accidents are symptoms of the management system not working. High demand, low support, poor involvement, low rewards are root causes that lead to employee dissatisfaction and eventually a number of risky behaviors.

Management Philosophy and Culture

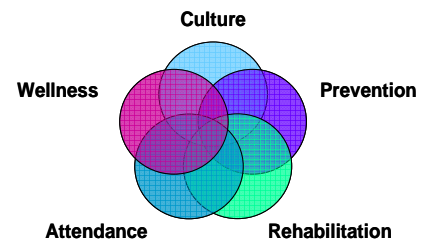
Management staff at the Airport Authority are very competent and results-oriented. Management's greatest strength is its ability to change and change quickly. For the most part, since its inception, in 1992, the Airport Authority's management team has been recruited from the private sector. The management team is relatively young and entrepreneurial, with many frontline managers having little experience managing elsewhere, especially in unionized settings. As a result, most of the management team has had little exposure to the dynamics of union-management relationships. They also tend to be territorial which regularly leads to interdepartmental rivalry.

The Airport Authority has 269 unionized employees and 74 managers (2005) who maintain the building, and run the day-to-day operations. The demographics are almost evenly split along traditional roles, with the trades and airport field maintenance staff being predominantly male, and the office support staff predominantly female.

There are two distinct cultures among Airport Authority staff. The predominant one is entrepreneurial, merit-based professionals who see themselves as accountable for their business results and their careers. These employees are new, most having been brought in since 1992 when the Airport Authority was first created. The secondary culture is more seniority-based. These employees, who represent 22% of the total, are predominantly ex-Transport Canada or Government of Canada employees.

The Airport Authority culture has shifted over the years as new employees start, long-term employees retire, and existing staff see positive changes in the Airport Authority's management style. A disconnect sometimes exists between the newer employees and the older employees, who by virtue of their seniority, tend to be more engaged in union matters, and therefore the bargaining process and union agenda.

An organizations culture is the sum of its basic assumptions and beliefs about reality. They determine the way we make decisions, feel, think, and act. Cultures are hard to change as they provide comfort for employees – employees have set communication streams and set expectations. When organizations attempt to change cultures, these expectations and communication streams are threatened which leads to employees fighting to maintain the existing culture. After all, it's what they are comfortable with. The Authority developed a five point process to deal with safety culture issues with great success.



The five points are identified in the diagram shown on page 3. They are cultural development, prevention, rehabilitation, attendance support and wellness.

The research that made Herzberg's a well recognized name tackled the question of employee motivation directly. His results indicated that the factors that motivate people to work fall into two distinct categories—he called them 'hygiene factors' and 'motivation factors'. The former, in his view, do not provide positive motivation—but their absence can cause dissatisfaction, in the same way that hygiene prevents disease rather than increasing well-being. The latter speak to people's higher needs, and tend to produce positive or greater satisfaction.

Using Herzberg's, and other management theorist's hypothesis, the Airport Authority developed a strategy ensuring all parts were linked, and did not conflict with each other.

Culture

In order to deal with the real issues or barriers to performance, the organization needs to gather employee perceptions in a confidential and anonymous method. The Authority conducts a climate or organization culture survey every two to three years. In 2002, the employees rated the Authority's commitment to a healthy and safe work environment as the #1 positively rated area (85% positive response). Not wishing to sit on its laurels, the Authority under the auspices of the Joint Health & Safety Committee, conducted an in-depth safety perception survey of all staff. Over 80% of employees and 95% of managers responded. The perception survey, developed by

Dan Peterson, categorizes safety and health activities into 21 elements. The results, not surprisingly, were both positive and negative. The top rated elements were:

1. Management Credibility
2. Accident Investigations
3. Attitude Towards Safety
4. Support for Safety
5. Safety Climate.

A strategy was developed for the bottom rated elements:

1. Recognition for performance
2. Safety training
3. Addressing safety concerns
4. Goals for safety performance
5. Inspections.

The strategy, which was far more about change management than safety management, was based on John Kotter's book, *Leading Change*. Specifically, the last of his eight-step process to create lasting change in an organization—anchoring new approaches to the culture.

In order to anchor the behaviour the Authority expected of its management staff, clear guidelines on employee involvement and engagement around safety was developed. The Authority developed the “President Award for Safety Excellence” that essentially pitted departments against each other for a dinner, and awards from the President of the company. Managers were rewarded for upstream activities that focused on the bottom 5 perception survey results. The activities had to involve their staff, and they had to report their activities to the Health & Safety Department on a monthly basis who in turn reported overall activities to the senior management team. While the activities were voluntary, senior management played a key role in ensuring their managers understood their expectation for involvement. The process had the benefit of the following:

1. Forced goal setting for safety in all departments
2. Anchored upstream preventive behaviour in management
3. Involved staff in the process
4. Measured behavioral improvement
5. Rewarded behaviour, not results
6. Reduced hazards and incidents in the workplace.

At the same time, managers were trained in leadership and performance management to ensure they had the necessary tools to engage their staff in a meaningful way.

Prevention

The Authority developed the following model to simplify the structure for the Environmental, Health and Safety Management System (EHSMS). The model is comprised of two main components: 1) the system structure; and 2) environmental, health and safety programs.

The structure includes identification of driving forces such as legislative and other requirements, a risk/opportunity assessment tool, system documentation, and management reviews. Except for

the assessment tool, the EHSMS system elements work behind-the-scenes and are 'invisible' to the majority of employees.

The environmental and safety programs were established to reduce risks or realize opportunities. These may have been "one-off" corrective and preventive actions, or formal programs that were developed by the Environment and Health and Safety departments. The formal programs were then either managed by the Environment and Health and Safety departments, or other departments depending on the type of activities required. Each high priority activity has objectives and targets that are described in departmental business plans, monitored, reported on, and periodically reviewed to examine their effectiveness. The programs are the primary interface between Airport Authority employees and EHSMS components.

Risks and opportunities are identified and screened through the risk assessment tool. They are prioritized addressed through the Environmental, Health and Safety programs resulting in mitigated risks and realized opportunities.

The programs are audited to check for items such as the progress of objectives and targets. Reviews of the system are done to ensure that the structure is practical, efficient, meets the needs of the organization, and follows well known and established practices within the ISO and OHSAS requirements. Throughout the process, there is continual improvement.

Rehabilitation

Despite the best efforts of everyone involved, employees still get hurt. When it comes to safety, organizations are measured not only on how they prevent accidents, but what they do with those employees who do get hurt. The Authority's philosophy is simple; it does not matter where an employee gets hurt, it is an employee in pain, and a significant resource that is not functioning well.

The Authority takes a self insured approach to rehabilitation. It covers the cost for rehabilitation and expedited testing to get employees any needed help as early as possible. Multiple studies have shown that the sooner employees get back to work the faster they heal. The process for dealing with rehabilitation received excellent support from the Union.

The results speak for themselves; Over a 5 year period the lost time days went from 222 per year to 10 in a year. A significant portion of this was due to better risk assessments and reduction of exposure to harm, but it could also be credited to a proactive approach to rehabilitating employees who were hurting. Employees had access to rehabilitation services before they lost any time. On numerous occasions the employee would come to the author and ask for help before putting in an injury report. The upfront supply of rehabilitation created employee goodwill, and a positive culture around health and rehabilitation.

Attendance

The Attendance Management Program was established to ensure all employees understood their responsibility to take care of themselves, and show up for work on a regular and consistent basis. At some point in the journey to zero accidents employers get to the point of diminishing returns. It is at this point that proactive activities need to focus on employee health and personal risk.

The approach was not a punitive one, but rather a supportive process for non-culpable absenteeism that creates a dialog between employee and supervisor around expectations and offers of assistance. Employee's absenteeism was measured against that of their peers. If they exceeded the peer average by 1.5%, the supervisor had to look into the circumstances around the absenteeism and determine if it is likely to continue. If not, the employee was left alone. If it appeared that it was likely to continue, a supportive interview was established and expectations were outlined with the employee.

Wellness

Once risks had been assessed and hazards reduced, the Authority turned its mind to the health of its employees. It established a fairly traditional wellness program that awarded employees for preventive behaviors and activities. Points were awarded for exercising, healthy lifestyle choices, being environmental consensus, safety suggestions, good attendance, no accidents, and involvement on employer committees. Employees could earn up to \$210 in gift certificates to exercise facilities and equipment suppliers. The Authority won two awards for its innovative approach to wellness.

Conclusion

Positive culture norms were established, accidents were reduced and overall absenteeism was reduced to less than 3%.

The results could not have happened with only one or two of the programs listed. It took concentrated effort of all departments and a strategy established by the safety experts hired by the Authority. The activities outlined in this paper were published by the author in 1999 as a strategy document for successful cultural development of the Authority. The strategy was based on personal experience and the teachings of Dr. Dan Petersen. It took three years longer than originally anticipated to get the results listed, but the journey to zero is rarely a straight line.

Bibliography

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