

BY DAN SINGER

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

A formula for success

I used to be envious of long-tenured city and county managers, those who had spent 20 to 25 years in one local government. Given how slowly things seem to move in government, the chance to really effectuate change in a community seemed to require a long tenure.

So when I found myself “in transition” last year after only a few years on the job, I was disheartened because I didn’t believe I had been given the chance to make a difference in my community. Yet, upon my departure and since that time, I’ve been overwhelmed with feedback from my previous employees about the positive impacts I made on the organization and its members.

What I’ve come to fully appreciate is that it isn’t so much the amount of time managers spend in an organization, as it is the way we spend that time that matters most. In just two years, it turns out, I was quite successful in working with our management team at boosting morale and productivity, lowering absenteeism and workers’ compensation claims, and creating an environment where employees were recognized and appreciated for their contributions.

Upon reflection, what I now know is that the formula for this success was really quite simple—applicable in any organization—and absolutely worth repeating.

In my opinion, here are the four steps that contributed to the organization’s success:

Listen. Longtime and now former city manager Frank Benest once advised me that when you arrive in a new organization, your first order of business should be to seek the input of employees on what is going well, what needs attention, and what would make the organization better.

Gaining their insight and doing something with the feedback demonstrates you are here to truly listen. Plus, it allows the organization to have input and see that the manager is genuine about addressing their ideas and concerns.

After all, as the “newcomer” to an organization, you are the least knowledgeable person around; thus relying on your listening skills is key to establishing rapport and credibility with those around you.

Demonstrate. Listening is an important first step, but it is somewhat meaningless unless and until you demonstrate to the organization that you have heard the input from employees. Demonstrating that their comments, ideas, and concerns are important to you requires an action plan based on their input, lest you risk looking like you don’t care about that input.

Find some low-hanging fruit you can tackle immediately and engage the organization in a meaningful discussion about the more significant suggestions and concerns that may need to be addressed over time.

Communicate. All too often, the manager’s office is isolated from the organization or is primarily focused on addressing the elected officials’ concerns, forgetting that most employees are left out of the information loop. As a manager, you simply cannot communicate enough.

Communicate to the elected officials and the employees, communicate with the public, communicate with volunteers and appointed members of the organization, and communicate with the media. You can’t really over-communicate.

In my last position, it became clear that employees wanted to be informed, so we enhanced the content of all-hands

meetings and management retreats. In addition to an internal employee newsletter, we established an electronic bulletin we called “Take 5.”

It briefs employees on significant decisions the morning after a council meeting or a community workshop. This way, employees were given the greatest opportunity to stay informed from the perspective of the manager’s office, leaving them feeling communicated with, informed, and most of all, valued.

Celebrate. Let’s face it. Government is a bit stale and bureaucratic at times, and the public doesn’t want to see tax dollars spent on employee perks and nonessential services. Yet, high morale equals high productivity, so the challenge is finding ways to celebrate, recognize achievement, and have fun while doing the important work of the community.

Call it “serious” fun. You don’t have to spend a lot to achieve a lot, but I don’t know of a single organization whose employees believe they spend too much time on rewards and recognition. Therefore, go to town, be innovative, be resourceful, and empower employees to identify the type of celebrating and recognizing that is meaningful to them.

This is best achieved organically. Each organization has its own culture and should look for opportunities for enrichment and celebration that are appropriate and consistent with the vision and values of the council—and, of course, the budget.

Leaving an imprint on an organization doesn’t have to take years, but it takes a concerted effort to listen and engage. **PM**



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