



DETERMINATION
AGILITY
RESOLUTION

FINAL REPORT

Island Health - Duncan Staffing Office
Workplace Assessment Process

June 30th, 2021

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REPORT OF THE WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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Introduction

Jessica McNamara (Partner, ADR Education) was engaged to design and conduct a workplace assessment process for the Duncan Staffing Office, Island Health.

Leadership is committed to improving workplace relations and quality of life in the Staffing Office. To do so, an assessment and analysis of the issues, concerns and opportunities for improvement was undertaken. The intent of the process was to identify the main issues and problems to determine how staff can work together more effectively and efficiently. This workplace assessment process is therefore not designed to find fault, attribute blame, or criticize. It is intended to provide staff, supervisors, and management with an opportunity to reflect on the dynamics, challenges and issues that may be impacting the Office's functionality and wellbeing.

A process was designed that includes the following tasks:

- Conduct private and confidential interviews with staff on a voluntary basis
- Develop a list of consistent themes (dominant perspectives) about workplace challenges and issues needing attention and resolution
- Draft a summary report that describes the main themes requiring action and improvement, and provide a set of recommendations
- Present the report to the group and discuss its contents
- Provide strategic advice and assistance to senior management about how to move ahead with implementing the action plan

In total, 14 people were interviewed. Input from staff, supervisors, Union representatives and managers was received. Sincere thanks to all participants for taking the time to share your perspectives and insights. Your collective willingness to speak openly about your views and experiences is gratefully acknowledged. The responsibility for improvement and addressing unresolved issues rests with *all* team members, not just management or any single individual. It will require the commitment and participation of the group as a whole to implement positive changes. Strong leadership and support from senior management will be a crucial ingredient for moving forward effectively.

Nature of the Assessment

This workplace assessment is not an investigation. It is an enquiry by the assessor about the health of the workplace ***from the point of view of those who work in it***. The assessor's job is not to critically investigate the trustworthiness of anything that is reported to her. On the contrary, the assessor is reporting on the opinions of those who work in the workplace about its dynamics and health.

Having said that, the assessment is rendered after one-on-one interviews with a majority of the people working in the office and, as such, is an accurate picture of the views of many of those in the workplace. In the report, terms like “many”, “some”, “most”, “a great majority” or “generally” will be used. Such terms are intended to give the reader an approximation of how broadly or narrowly a view or opinion was shared.

Self-imposed Limits to the Report

Predictably, in the interviews the assessor heard participants’ opinions about specific conflicts with staff, supervisors and managers. The themes that emerged from these interviews are, of course, dependably included in this report. However, the assessor is stopping short of setting out comments about individual staff, supervisors, or managers. A workplace assessment is not an investigation and is therefore not intended to be a tool to find fault or expose alleged breaches of performance. Where there are consistent personal critiques of individuals in this workplace, the assessor would encourage management to pursue those with those individuals. That could involve advice, coaching, training, and other remedies.

About this Report

This report aims to be concise and descriptive. It is composed by considering and analyzing all the information shared during the interview process. It captures consistent perspectives identified by those interviewed and does not highlight infrequently mentioned issues. The contents of the report are not a statement of fact, nor are they designed to find fault or attribute blame. The report reflects the perceptions, opinions, views, and feelings revealed during the interviews. It describes and analyzes three main themes identified below. These core issues need to be addressed for the office to move forward positively and improve its effectiveness and functionality. The themes include:

1. Perception of Bias or Favoritism
2. Conflict and Complaints
3. Disrespectful Communication

In terms of format, first each of the three themes is summarized and briefly analyzed. Direct, un-attributable quotes are included to substantiate the meaning of each theme. The quotes represent similar statements that were heard frequently and are sufficiently general that they could have been said by anyone who was interviewed. Next, a series of procedural recommendations are provided to address each major issue.

Themes

The following section describes and analyzes the three core themes (main subjects) consistently identified through the interviews. They represent the main areas the office should focus on to see improvements and move forward positively. As mentioned, the themes are based on dominant perspectives and impressions. They are framed and nuanced by the assessors' analysis of the information shared during private interviews. Each theme is briefly described and analyzed, and includes direct, un-attributable quotes that help reinforce key messages.

1. Perception of Bias or Favoritism

Nearly every person interviewed shared their concerns about perceived favoritism with respect to certain employees. This was described in several different ways including preferential treatment in regards to opportunities, uneven workloads, and different standards for some staff. Interestingly, the perception of favoritism was not consistent with respect to who was perceived as the "favorites". On the contrary, some who were identified as receiving preferential treatment saw others as the people who were "favorites". Regardless, the perception of favoritism within the Office was a widely held view.

"Not everyone is being treated equally."

"Some people can do whatever they want, and others get called out for the littlest things."

"There are some people who work their butts off and don't get recognized for it and others who don't, and nothing gets done about it."

"There is a substantial amount of favoritism, even those who are favorites recognize it."

It is worth pointing out that the perception of favoritism is closely linked to the next theme – Conflict. The perception of favoritism was consistently coupled with experiences of conflict between members of the Staffing team. When there is a perception of inequity or unfairness within a team it leads to feelings of anger and frustration, which in turn, leads to conflict in the workplace. Small things that normally would not be an issue, become magnified and disputes become manifest. In addition, the perception of unfair treatment can lead to "negative attributions" where the motivation behind an action or decision is interpreted as intentionally negative towards a specific individual when that may not be the case.

In addition, long standing historical "baggage" (i.e., past complaints and disrespectful communications) continues to negatively influence relational dynamics in the workplace. The history between some staff and those in supervisory and management positions contributes to the perception of favoritism and feeds into a culture of complaining. It is essential that a "base

line” understanding of procedures, contractual obligations and how decisions are made is established and consistently followed.

2. Conflict and Complaints

Conflict is normal and can even be healthy in an organization– if addressed appropriately. A consistent theme heard from many participants was that conflict and disputes (be they interpersonal conflict between staff or management, or accusations of inappropriate conduct) were often not being addressed or resolved. Many staff described feeling ill-equipped to address some of the conflicts and issues that they were experiencing. In addition, a lack of clarity around what options/processes are available to handle conflicts has led to a pattern of relying on the Union to handle issues that are often outside the scope of the Collective Agreement. This systematic conflict avoidance - aversion to discussing and addressing conflict and issues head-on, has led many employees to feel unwelcome raising issues and concerns; either because it simply won't be addressed, or because they fear doing so will cause the conflict to get worse.

“There is no consistency in how complaints are handled.”

“We are all walking on eggshells, don't know if someone is going to lose their temper.”

“It is a small space, the tension and negativity seeps into you.”

“There is a fair amount of conflict, and no one deals with it, it festers, and the tension rises.”

“Interpersonal conflict is rampant, and it is not a hospitable workplace.”

The office needs to consider and establish its conflict and complaint handling philosophy and ensure effective processes and procedures are available to promote constructive engagement. Ineffectively addressed conflict management and complaint handling has a very negative impact on the team's reputation and overall wellbeing. Establishing increased conflict competence and capacity requires the integration of values and philosophy (attitude), with available approaches for constructive engagement (processes) backed by intentional behaviours and actions (skills and abilities). Potential exists to build on the existing conflict and complaint handling resources within the office to further enhance their utility and practical value.

3. Disrespectful Communication

At present, workplace morale is fairly low. Frustration is a regular experience for many employees and often results in a lack of respectful communication. Communications in the Office were described mainly as negative, indirect, and volatile.

“So much complaining and venting, it wears you down.”

“People talking about each other behind [their] backs all the time instead of having a conversation.”

“Whispering, gossiping, talking behind backs and complaining.”

“Some of the things that people say are so unprofessional and disrespectful. It wouldn’t be tolerated in another workplace.”

“There is raised voices, even yelling sometimes. This is a small space, it’s terrible.”

“Raised voices, arguments, name calling. Uncomfortable tension is very common.”

Effective communication requires intentional listening, acknowledgement, empathy, curiosity, and clear articulation of ideas and meaning. It is a major effort to demonstrate the core skills and attitudes necessary for effective communication. It is not unusual in any workplace to have different tolerance levels for different styles of communication. However, the level of discomfort expressed by many of the interviewees points to an issue that needs to be addressed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address the major issues described in this report and are intentionally procedural in nature. The specifics, including details about implementation and monitoring will be discussed with the group and finalized by management. The suggestions presented below do not represent an immediate solution or quick fix. However, taken together they could be implemented in the relatively near-term provided the motivation, resources and leadership exist to do so. It should be noted that while these recommendations are organized around the themes discussed above, there is some overlap between them, and they may contribute to more than one theme. The recommendations are primarily focused on the goals of:

- Addressing perceptions of favoritism
- Improving communication and conflict competence

The recommendations should improve the situation in the office, provided there is supportive leadership and genuine commitment to change. The responsibility to move forward positively rests with everyone in the office. A follow-up is part of the workplace assessment process and will be planned accordingly.

1. Addressing Perceptions of Favoritism

- a. Review all policies, procedures, and expectations regarding logistical operations of the office (work distribution, opportunities, complaint handling etc.) with the staff, including obligations that are outlined in the Collective Agreement. Engage the assistance of Union representatives for this.
- b. In collaboration with the Union and staff, develop policies and procedures for logistical operations of the Office in areas where none currently exist. One area that needs immediate attention is opportunities for advancement and training.
- c. Once the policies and procedures have been reviewed, they must be implemented consistently to ensure fairness. Where there is a need for flexibility within the policies and procedures (i.e., exceptional circumstances) the reason for the accommodation must be communicated and understood by all staff.

2. Improving Communication and Conflict Competence

- a. Hold a workshop for all staff, supervisors, and management to jointly develop a “Team Charter”. The Charter should consist of agreed upon expectations about behavior/communication in the workplace, agreed upon processes for handling conflicts and procedural steps to be followed if the Charter is not honored.
- b. Hold a Respectful Workplace training session for all staff. This session would need to be at least a half-day session.
- c. Hold a Communicating in Conflict training session for all staff and supervisors. The training will need to be at least a half-day and focus on skills and process for addressing workplace conflict.

Follow-Up

A Follow-up Review is a necessary part of the workplace assessment process. It is intended to evaluate progress, monitor changes and determine what further actions may still be required. The Follow-Up Review will be planned and organized by senior management.