

TRANSFORMING BUSINESS UNITS OF U. S. POSTAL SERVICE INTO A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

The goal of this evaluation study is to improve the work environment in each business unit of the Central Illinois Performance Cluster (CIPC) within the U. S. Postal Service (USPS). To accomplish this objective we plan to institutionalize the "Action Imperatives" of a Learning Organization, taken from "Dimensions of the Learning Organization instrument by Marsick and Watkins. The measurement instrument used is the Employee Opinion Survey (EOS), which is completed quarterly by 25% of USPS workforce. To date, the participation rate of the survey has increased by 25% and the favorable rating rose by 4.1%, since this initiative has been undertaken. More conclusive evidence will be available at the end of this 3-year study.

The secondary goal is to explore the relationships between various interventions with individuals, leading to team interactions derived from the results of the EOS. At the end of each evaluation period a comparison is made with prior period's data and an Action Plan is established in each work unit. Empirical results suggest that dialogue and learning were most effective in helping teams produce positive EOS results. If this effort is successful it may be identified as a "Best Practice" for considered implementation to a wider audience.

Introduction and Environmental Scanning

The objective is to create an environment where learning can take place. "The content for every learner in every educational activity influences the learner's skills in, or attitude toward, learning." Bergevin, McKinley, and Smith (as cited in Smith 1982). At the beginning of this project I utilized the 2000 Fiscal Year (FY), EOS results, as a starting place and as a "needs analysis" to prioritize where to focus my energies as the Voice of the Employee (VOE) Coordinator. Follow-up focus groups and on-site visits to individual work units were conducted to clarify those needs. I discovered there was a need for an Awareness Campaign, because neither the employees nor their supervisors saw much value in completing the survey information.

An independent contractor, Market Facts, developed the actual survey. They collaborated with postal employees at all levels of the organization. Market Facts continues to administer the EOS to insure employee confidentiality.

I conducted informational sessions with front-line supervisors and their managers, concerning the importance of completing the EOS. The survey is composed of 34 questions, six of these questions drive the favorable or unfavorable rating of the employee and the other 28 questions indicate why the "Driver Questions" either rose or fell in score. Hence they are called "Indicator Questions". The survey is a barometer of the workplace environment. It helps management keep a finger on the pulse of conditions in each of the measured work units.

Methodology

The reason I chose management for the first learning intervention is, according to the USPS Action Planning & Feedback Guide, Postal Service Managers are expected to know and respond to the ideas, interests, and concerns of employees within their work unit. They also serve as the primary communication link between employees and higher level management. Consequently, they play a critical role in creating a productive and satisfying work environment that is conducive to providing quality service. Sharing with their employees what has been learned through the survey process, and using this information to develop and implement improvements, are important steps in creating the desired work environment. Further the survey queries the

employees on how well their supervisor communicates with them. Therefore, there is a need to reinforce the idea that giving and seeking feedback from the people performing the actual work is imperative to make people feel they are a vital part of the organization. This should enhance job satisfaction and this is an important "piece of the puzzle" to encourage workplace harmony.

I built my strategy around Woolner's concept of a Learning Organization:

"A learning organization is one in which learning and work is integrated in an ongoing and systematic fashion to support continuous improvement of the organization at three levels: Individuals, workgroups or teams, and the system as a whole. The purpose of a learning organization is two fold. The first is to close the gap between the theory and aspirations of an organization and its practice. The second is to build a capacity for the organization to change, adapt, and innovate continuously" Woolner (1992).

The target audience is the employees, or those individuals who makeup the units or teams of the organization as a whole. One of my goals was to close the gap between the Mission, Vision and Critical Initiatives of the Postal Service and the actual practice. The USPS Strategy for People is as follows:

"The Postal Service has a responsibility to the hundreds of thousands of postal employees in the future. It needs to make sure they have the knowledge, skills, tools and support systems they require to meet the needs of customers who ultimately are the source of revenue and jobs. At the same time, the organization needs to make sure the Postal Service is a good place to work – with safety, fairness, and opportunity based on performance as the values that shape the workplace environment" USPS (1998) .

By closing this gap, USPS will build its capacity to change, adapt, and innovate continuously. These capabilities are imperative in this time of Postal Transformation within a failing economy, which dictates the necessity for change.

Developing unit action plans, will help to, "Empower people toward a collective vision," Marsick et. al. (2001). Taking their suggestions seriously helps employees to know their opinions are valued. This makes the employee feel more integrally involved in the operation. Now, they are involved in setting and implementing those issues for which they are held responsible and accountable.

At the end of FY 2001 each unit, with EOS results was evaluated. The accumulative scores for the survey and each of the six Driver Questions were documented and compared to the prior FY. The differences were annotated and each unit received a copy of its comparison. Each Unit Manager was asked to develop a Workplace Improvement Action Plan with their employees. Managers were instructed to conduct a joint solution discovery keeping the CIPC Action Plan in mind. That plan is as follows: Communication is our VOE Expectation. In the Central IL PC we communicate with dignity and respect. Workplace communications hold people accountable for the work they do and recognize both small and large achievements.

This, coupled with "Our Workplace Values" which states:

"We the members of the Great Lakes Area leadership team pledge to participate in the continuing effort to improve the workplace environment by living these values to help us achieve our vision for the Great Lakes Area and provide the foundation for all of our interactions. Simply stated, they are Be Fair, Value Diversity, Develop People, Communicate Openly, & Honestly, Encourage Teamwork, Keep Promises" USPS (1998).

These are our stated commitments. Now that we have the verbiage we must make our actions match our words. In other words, "Walk the Talk".

Follow-up unit visits and on-site audits revealed there was a need for an additional Learning intervention. I wrote a course entitled, "Getting to the Bottom-line Starts at the Frontline." Operations people were not buying in to the idea of investing in human capital. They were still worshipping at the altar of the almighty dollar. Therefore, we want to convince management within the Cluster of their obligation to involve employees, not only for informational purposes, but to create an environment of increased job satisfaction and thereby an environment of increased

productivity. If that environment exists employees are more likely to be regular in attendance, contribute and provide discretionary effort for the success of the organization. In creating this environment, we should also take into account the Four Special Populations that exist with adult learners. Smith states,

“It will be asked if our four generalizations about the salient characteristics of adult learners and six optimum conditions for learning apply evenly to adults of all ages and backgrounds – to the undereducated as well as the Ph.D., to the twenty-year old and the eighty-year old alike” Smith (1982).

In the USPS, we have all of the categories and the answer is to know the employees within a manager’s area of responsibility to see how to best motivate them. In other words what type of environment and conditions will help them learn and grow.

By generating Unit Action Plans and providing continual feedback to those plans and the Employee Opinion Survey, the employee will have an opportunity to learn on the job. The ongoing element of this strategy provides continuous education and the growth of lessons learned in the workplace towards its improvement. If that improvement does not take place, this provides an opportunity for more input and problem solving by the group. This “Encourages collaboration and team learning, Creates continuous learning opportunities, and Promotes inquiry and dialogue” Marsick et. al. (2001). A number of scholars in the organizational learning literature say teams are the vessels through which individuals transform their unique knowledge and insights into the collective learning from which the entire system can benefit.

Employees “gain productive reasoning skills to express their views, and the capacity to listen & inquire into the views of others.” We are trying to change the culture “to support questioning, feedback, and experimentation” Marsick et. al. (2001). In my opinion, USPS does an excellent job in sharing information. We must now take the time to support questioning to elicit the feedback needed to be successful. Further, risk taking and experimentation is applauded when the outcome is successful. However, reactions are not treated the same if the outcome is unsuccessful. It is like a baseball strategy when the coach decides to put a new pitcher in the lineup. If the pitcher does not let the other team score, well, that was a great idea. However, if the other team scores, the fans want to know, “why did you do that?” We must do a better job of learning from our mistakes as well as from our successes, to help with the experimentation piece of the puzzle. In fact, promoting an environment for experimentation is one of the next steps we must take to become a Learning Organization.

Other steps are to enrich “Continuous Learning Opportunities”, by openly discussing mistakes in order to learn from them, doing a better job of identifying skills employees need for future work tasks, and stifling some of the competitiveness so we can do a better job of coaching and mentoring Marsick et. al. (2001). Lastly, a skills bank would enhance the learning environment for coaching and mentoring purposes not just to establish a training record once a person has acquired additional knowledge, but to be used for upward mobility and aid in USPS job searches.

Results

As the VOE Coordinator, I continually analyze and evaluate the data for the members of the cluster. Each quarter, I provide a feedback sheet with the current results of the prior quarter’s survey. Twenty-nine of the thirty-four survey questions remained the same or improved, in Quarter One of the current FY

There was slippage in only 5 of the questions, each of which dropped by one point. The exception was question 7, which plummeted by 5 points. Question 7 concerns safety on the job and I think this dive in the score of #7 is reflective of the Anthrax scare, which began in October. Continual communication of management’s concern to each of their employees will help to avoid slippage in the future. Your employees don’t CARE how much you KNOW until they KNOW how much you CARE.

The first quarter was a challenging time for the USPS with the Anthrax scare and management must have demonstrated that they cared about employees as human beings and not just "clogs in the wheel" that move the Postal Service. This was illustrated by the following results. Eighteen of the scores were our "Personal Best" (better/and the highest score in the past 3 years). During this quarter, we were able to, "Connect the organization to its environment" Marsick et. al. (2001). Employees could see the impact of their work on the entire organization and the nation. When planes were not flying, and other government agencies closed, the mail went through, even if we had to transport it over the road. The momentum kept building in the next quarter. In the second quarter of Fiscal Year 2002, we remained the same or improved in 33 of the 34 questions.

This indicates an improvement from the prior quarter and prior data collection years as follows. Twenty-nine of the scores were our "Personal Best" (better/and the highest score in the past 3 years.) When compared to same period last year, all of the 34 questions either stayed the same or improved. Since I have been using quadrant analysis from the beginning of my detail. I was particularly delighted to see the transformation of the quadrants from FY 2001 TO FY 2002.

In an effort to clarify this accomplishment, please visualize a four-celled figure. Quadrant one (upper left) is entitled "Bad but getting better" and quadrant two (upper right) is "Good and getting better." Both of these cells are above the horizontal zero line, indicating that each question's value above that line either stayed the same or improved in its rating. That same quarter, 16 questions appeared in quadrant one (each of these questions rated from 1 to 50 points on the vertical axis.) Quadrant two is the target, we would like for all questions to rate between 50 and 100 points on the vertical axis and be improving in score on the horizontal. In quarter one, 13 of the 34 questions landed in quadrant two. The two cells below the zero line are quadrant three (lower left) "Bad and getting worse" (the vertical 1 to 50 point range). One question appeared in that cell. Finally, quadrant four (lower right), "Good but getting worse" housed 4 of the thirty-four questions.

In quarter two, 18 of the questions appeared in quadrant one (Bad but getting better.) The remainder of the questions, 16, were located in quadrant two, (Good and getting better). Quarter 2 results moved from a four-cell to a two-cell graph with all data improving. Our Cluster received special recognition from the Area Office because we demonstrated improvement in each of the questions, which suggests we are focusing on all areas of the survey and not simply concentrating on the "Driver Questions". To date, since the beginning of this initiative, the participation rate of the survey has increased by 25% and the favorable rating rose by 4.1%.

Discussion

In his book, The Fifth Discipline, Peter Senge identifies five disciplines of a Learning Organization which are personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning and systems thinking,. All are important, however, since we are beginning with the individual and personal mastery is the essence of choice, we can not choose for others. If we did it would be seen as manipulation. Our best alternative is to create an environment where employees want to make the best choices for themselves, their teams and the organization.

With each classroom intervention, I wanted the participants to have the ability to draw on prior knowledge and structure the class in a meaningful way for the group to possess transference capability. "The capacity to transfer has been called perhaps the most powerful capacity a person can possess" Selz and Ashley Grover (as cited in Smith 1982), "It involves the acquiring of instrumental habits that apply across teaching and learning situations and facilitate the mastery of new material" Grover (as cited in Smith 1982).

In this endeavor I simulated work competencies, provided sufficient time for exploration within group activities and recorded findings and suggestions from each groups final feedback report. It

was my goal to model the behavior I wanted the students to adopt by being genuinely interested in both seeking and providing feedback.

In a film that was shown to all employees, USPS Great Lakes Vice President, CIPC District Manager & Senior Plant Manager provided clear, concise expectations concerning the Voice of the Employee. The stated expectations were about both workplace environment and the importance of completing the survey for continued improvements within the work units. This provided the line of sight commitment it took to catapult the VOE effort forward. I use this film to begin each class. During these sessions, I highlight our Postmaster General (PMG) John Potter.

PMG Potter assumed the duties of "Steering the Helm" of the USPS when we were about to encounter "rough waters". He took office last summer, before the terrorism of 9/11. He charted his course and gave it to us in the form of a star. I like to call it our North Star because it clearly states what direction we should take as an organization to exceed customer expectations, focus on our most valuable resource the employee, which will ensure a healthy organization.

At its pinnacle, the 5-point Star depicts Developing People with the attention of treating all of those people as partners. Throughout the fabric of the star is interwoven the most important resource, people. The other 4 points are, Pursuing Reform with messengers, Managing costs with productive people, Growing Revenue with sales representatives and Improving Service with service representatives. The PMG's Strategies for Success include every person employed with the USPS in each of its categories. "Leaders model and support learning" Marsick et. al. (2001). They model the behavior that they want their employees to adopt and they not only support but also champion this type of environment.

After I illustrate how our CEO values people, I open a discussion on the twelve worker beliefs that increase productivity in a multi-year Gallup study. This study was based on the analysis of data, from more than 100,000 employees, in 12 industries. Dissection of the study revealed, the consistent, reliable relationship between the 12 beliefs and the bottom line, such as profits, productivity, employee retention and customer loyalty. It also shows a relationship between the Postmaster General's vision and those industries thriving in today's marketplace. The comparison also illustrated that our measured strategies were aligned with those industries successful in the private sector and should assist us in our benchmarking efforts.

In focus groups, we have extensive dialogue concerning the failing economy and its effect on USPS. K-Mart recently closed 284 of their stores. We will never retrieve the mail volume that was generated from those stores. It is time to rally behind the PMG and the Transformation Plan.

The Postal Service performs the vital task of providing communications access to all Americans, in every community, while sustaining its operations in an economically self-sufficient manner and as a break-even organization. USPS will follow a path leading to goals shaped by its historic mission, and by the organization's understanding of how to fulfill its mission in a complex, changing environment by adopting a new business model. This new model is called Commercial Government Enterprise (CGE). This model offers the necessary tools and flexibility in pricing, products and personnel to operate in a more businesslike manner. The CGE model provides the potential to continue delivering to everyone, everywhere at affordable prices. It saves the government from subsidizing mail delivery, while at the same time limits the risk of losing universal mail delivery that a fully privatized postal service might face. Finally, it is a new model for government. An exact replica does not exist elsewhere in the United States. The Postal Service needs a model that deals effectively with its unique role and situation.

This situation further points out the necessity to "Encourage collaboration and team learning and Establish systems to capture and share learning" Marsick et. al. (2001). We must all pull together to share and readily access different modes of thinking and as a culture we must value that collaboration. In 1996 my Customer Relations Coordinator (CRC) established a nationwide network for his counterparts. It is entitled "Brain Waves". He disseminates the information on a

regular basis, responds to questions for which he has the answer, and makes both available for more input by other CRC's around the country. If he does not know the answer to the question he posts it and others who have had experience on the issue respond. Of course, being the founder of the concept my CRC maintains the system. The point is he has created a system that is job related and easily accessible to his functional area. I think we, as an organization, should expand on this concept for increased learning.

The Workplace Environment Consulting Team (WEC) coaches and mentors managers, who are experiencing difficulty with their Unit Action Plans and Feedback Sessions. A toolkit was developed for the WEC Team to help in their audit procedures. This tool will give members the capability to assist each office in closing gaps in its performance indicated by survey results and unit action plan progress. Both the course and the toolkit emphasize the roles of a mentor. The role of a mentor reinforces the principals we are trying to put in place, the Action Imperatives of a Learning Organization. The team also audits compliance with the VOE guidelines.

I consolidated the feedback from the course, "Getting to the Bottom-line Starts at the Frontline" there were 3 feedback sessions built into the course. Sixty class offerings were delivered in nine sites throughout the Cluster and a total of 938 people participated. Next, I will provide that information to the Leadership and all members of the cluster, to share Best Practices and illustrate areas of opportunity with possible strategies & solutions for those areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since we have experienced some degree of success, the feedback and action planning sessions will continue each quarter and as needed to inspire inquiry and dialogue. I recommend other systems are put in place for all functional areas, similar to the one created by my CRC to "Establish systems to capture and share learning." Marsick et. al. (2001). This will promote team learning and encourage collaboration. It would also empower all people toward a collective vision, this environment and the Transformation plan. Another recommendation is to put systems in place to do a better job of learning from our mistakes, which will promote an environment for experimentation and risk taking. In the CIPC, we strive for continuous improvement and if the indicators continue to improve, the Postal Service may use this practice as a model for other business units throughout the organization. The adoption of this "Best Practice" may be implemented on a wider scope within the organization, such as, Area-wide or Nationally.

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