

A Crisis for Leaders: Improving Retention and Recruitment at the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation

Lorinda Lhotka

Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation

INTRODUCTION

Lack of retention and difficulty in recruitment of State employees is becoming a crisis recognized by the Governor, the State Legislature, and even regulated industry in Alaska. For a Department with just under 400 employees, ADEC this year has opened over 300 recruitments.

The most apparent contributing factors:

- high number of retirements (baby boomers)
- salaries not keeping up with inflation and the cost of living
- significantly decreased benefits and contributions for new State employees

Growth in the natural resource development industry has caused competition within the employee recruiting market in Alaska. Additionally, the bureaucratic culture of government is often a deterrent to the younger generation. Pay and benefits are difficult to change to within the Department as they are negotiated with the Governor's Office and go through a legislative process. ADEC employees enter government work knowing that private industry pay and benefit's exceed the State's. The best opportunity to improve retention and recruitment is by changing the work environment into one of more *flexibility, creativity and innovation*. Creating this change will take the work of leaders within ADEC.

This project was initiated to provide leadership development opportunities for all ADEC staff. A Leadership Series has been launched with the cooperation and commitment of the Commissioner's Office. This Series is intended to generate interest in leadership topics and encourage and foster a learning environment for future leadership training opportunities throughout ADEC, thereby improving staff retention and the marketability of ADEC as an exceptional place to work.

Behavior Over Time

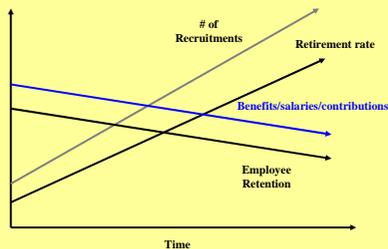
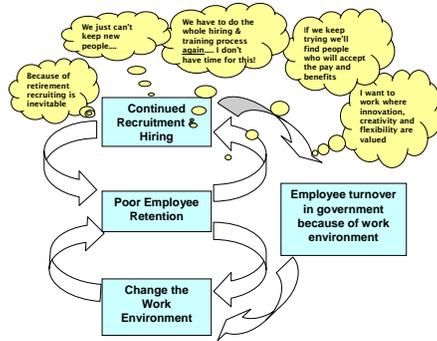


Figure 2: A "Shifting the Burden" archetype with associated "mental models" addressing the focusing question: "Why can't the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation retain employees?"



Ten Essential Services of Environmental Health:

This project directly relates to Essential Services by *assuring a competent workforce*. The goal of this project is to ultimately increase the capacity of ADEC to recruit and retain qualified employees. This project seeks to achieve that goal by enhancing the leadership ability of ADEC employees to ultimately make the Department an exceptional place to work. Without a competent workforce it is difficult to carry out any of the Essential Services.

National Goals Supported:

CDC "National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services"

Goal III: The need to foster strong leadership to enhance environmental public health practices.

Goal V: Develop the Workforce. Promote the development of a competent and effective environmental public health services workforce.

Environmental Health Competency Project:

Leadership at ADEC addresses areas of the core competencies of *management and communication*. Additionally, the traits described for an effective practitioner are those that would describe a strong leader.



OBJECTIVES

Program Goal: Develop and foster an environment for future leadership development throughout ADEC to improve staff retention and the marketability of ADEC as an exceptional place to work.

Health Problem: Ineffective leadership skills throughout the levels of ADEC contributes to decreased employee retention and increased recruiting, ultimately preventing the organization from providing consistent and effective public health services.

Outcome Objective: By January 2009, 25% of employees at all levels of ADEC will have received leadership development training through the ADEC Leadership Series. Specific strategies will have been developed and implemented by ADEC to foster on-going leadership development.

Determinant: Improved employee retention and job satisfaction.

Impact Objective: By 2010, the Department will see a 25% increase in job satisfaction amongst employees and employee retention will have increased by 10%.

Contributing Factors

- Stovepoting of organization (isolation of Programs and Divisions)
- Funding: sources and decreases
- Changes in administration that stifle collaborative programs within the Department and with regulated entities
- Generational gaps
- Lack of leadership development opportunities available
- Leadership development is not recognized as on-going priority
- Lack of staff input into strategic and leadership planning efforts

Process Objectives

- By July 31, 2007 develop ADEC Pilot Leadership Series
- August- December 2007 monthly Leadership Series training sessions
- By January 7th, 2008 debrief with Leadership Series workgroup
- By January 15th, 2008 evaluate Leadership Series
- By January 30th, 2008 improve and plan curriculum next Series
- By February 19th, 2008 kick-off next Leadership Series

RESULTS

The first Leadership Series at ADEC was completed with better than expected success. For several of the sessions more than 20% of ADEC employees participated. The Leadership Series sessions were 1.5 hours long and took place for each month over a 5-month period. The sessions were held concurrently in Juneau, Wasilla, Soldotna, Anchorage and Fairbanks by teleconference. The majority of participants reported in their evaluations that they would appreciate additional training opportunities on leadership topics and felt that the Series would assist in their future career development at the Department.

An electronic survey has been developed and will be sent out to all participants to generate feedback on ways to improve the series and interest in future Leadership Series topics. The Leadership Series workgroup is very motivated to continue with another Series. Different programs in the Department have expanded on some of the topics in the series and requested follow-up trainings. An off-shoot idea developed by the Leadership Series workgroup was to have in-house open houses at ADEC so employees can learn about different functions and programs within the Department. Two of these have already taken place in Fairbanks and Anchorage with great success.

CONCLUSIONS

If government creates an exceptional place to work, retention and recruitment will not be a significant problem. There are models of success in county governments such as Volusia County, Florida where the model of management and leadership changed to a more participative process. This ensured that recruitment for the county was no longer a problem. The most important impact of this leadership project is to stimulate interest and learning at ADEC in leadership development while creating a culture of organizational learning. In addition, the Leadership Series provides an opportunity for employees of the Department to learn about challenges in other Divisions and Programs, enhancing employee collaboration and problem-solving.

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