

ODI High Performance Work Initiative Programme 2015/16

Case Report – Waimate District Council Leadership Behaviours

Organisation Background

Waimate District Council is responsible for local government services from the Waitaki River in the south, to Lake Benmore in the west and Paereora River in the north-east. The main town is Waimate, and there are many smaller rural communities dispersed throughout the area.

The Waimate District Council consists of a Mayor, eight Councillors and the operational staff. The operational staff are headed by the Chief Executive, who is responsible to the elected Council for ensuring the effective, efficient and economic management of the Council's activities.

With a 2015/16 revenue of \$13.451 million, WDC employs 45.32 full-time-equivalent staff who work across six service delivery departments: roading, utilities, parks and reserves, regulatory services, corporate support, and community services planning. It is one of New Zealand's smaller local authorities, yet is still responsible for delivering all of the service expectations outlined in the Local Government Act and other statutory documents. Turnover is currently low at 3.24%. Staff engagement was last measured by survey in December 2014. While disengagement was low at only 6%, engagement was also low at 23%. Most staff were recorded as 'neutral' (71%).

WDC joined ODI's High Performance Work Initiative programme (ODI HPWI) in order to source expertise to help them transition and optimise performance in their small, busy and challenging work context.

Consultancy Goal

Following the diagnostics phase of the ODI HPWI, Waimate District Council commenced its first consultancy on performance management and rewards/recognition. The first consultancy is the subject of a separate case study. At the time of commencing this second consultancy on Leadership Behaviours, workshops to discuss past experiences with appraisal systems and hopes for the future had been conducted with managers and staff, but the first consultancy was not completed. So both consultants sought to run their consultancies in tandem and in such a manner that they would help achieve efficient and desirable outcomes for Waimate District Council (WDC).

This consultancy allowed for us to 23 hours to develop leadership behaviours at the organisation. More specifically, the consultancy goal was

- To improve the leadership team, managers, and staff's understanding about the expectations of modern leadership and they roles they play, individually and collectively, in living up to those expectations.

Consultancy Action Plan

The key organisational contacts and guides for this work were the Human Resources Manager and Personal Assistant to the CEO. Planning discussions revealed that they wanted to reach as many staff and managers as they could through a workshop approach to raise awareness about leadership behaviours. As such, two two-hour workshops were scheduled with WDC staff, one two-hour workshop with front-line leaders, and one four-hour workshop with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The consultant travelled to Waimate to deliver the workshops on two occasions – one day for the sessions

with staff and another day for the sessions with managers.

As well as providing ideas about modern leadership practice, including distinctions from managerial practice, the workshops sought to gain input on ideal leadership behaviours based on participants' experience of leaders during their lifetime, and views about what leaders at WDC could 'stop-start-continue' to do in support of good leadership practice. Importantly, it was recognised by participants that leadership behaviour can be, and ideally is, exhibited by everyone in a local government organisation, particularly one of WDC's size and nature. Everyone was urged to identify an element of leadership discussed during the workshops to practice more deliberately in the immediate future. During their session, the managers could do this with heightened awareness of what would make a difference to staff, because they were provided with information about what staff said they wanted managers to 'stop-start-continue' to do in pursuit of improved leadership.

During the SLT workshop, two additional discussions were held about positive leadership behaviours, and recommendations for continuing the work on improving leadership behaviours as a result of the staff workshops.

Consultancy Outputs Produced

These were the outputs of the consultancy:

- **Two staff workshops**, each of two-hours duration
- **One workshop for front-line leaders**, of two-hours duration
- **One workshop for SLT**, of 3.25 hours duration (shorter than the planned four hours, due to rearrangements made on the day of the workshop)
- Summary of 'stop-start-continue' feedback from staff for front-line leaders.
- **Report with recommendations** for SLT as a result of the staff workshops. The recommendations were that:
 1. The senior managers consider the ideas in the report and discuss them in the SLT workshop, and again in the near future. The purpose of the discussions is to determine what action to take, and how to communicate with staff about what you have heard and what action you are taking.
 2. The senior management team consider how to deploy the positive leadership tools discussed in the SLT workshop, in pursuit of improving staff views about managers knowing their skills and capabilities, hearing their points of view, and demonstrating appreciation for the work they do. Come to at least initial agreements today.
 3. SLT make available to all staff all of the 'good leadership' circles produced by the groups involved in workshops in this programme.
 4. SLT authorise the consultant to use the information from all of the workshops to draft leadership behaviours for WDC. (This would be over and above the work completed as part of the High Performance Work Initiative. Estimated time to complete this draft is 4-5 hours.) Once these are finalised by WDC, they could be used as a basis for giving and receiving feedback at all levels. ODI could provide further suggestions about how to use the tool, if WDC is interested.

Further training and development:

5. Consideration be given to how to resource and provide training to front-line managers.
 6. Consideration be given to a leadership programme for senior leaders. Ideally such a programme would involve action learning support and/or coaching.
- Provision of 'good leadership' examples from all workshops, together with a recommendation to use these as the basis of development of an aspirational leadership behaviour model for WDC.

Issues, Opportunities and Solutions identified during the Consultancy

The ***biggest challenge*** for WDC is progressing organisational development intentions, including those around leadership behaviours, in the context of a time-poor environment. By their very nature, local government organisations have a challenging time in election years, while they seek to deliver their busy activity management plan work programmes, as well as support the electoral process through the transfer and induction processes as politicians finish and start their (new) terms in office. There is no 'easy time' in local government to embark on high performance work initiatives, and certainly there is no mandate to stop other work in order to make progress, even if making such progress will significantly benefit the organisation in busy times. That staff could be released for a maximum of two-hours for a workshop poses considerable constraints on real action and behavioural change that can be expected from such short opportunities to reach people. From a consulting delivery perspective, it is also challenging when significant travel time needs to be factored into the working day for training sessions.

The ***biggest opportunity*** presented by this consultancy has been engaging so many people in the organisation in conversations about leadership. With this work following on from an organisational engagement survey, and conversations about performance as part of the other (concurrent) consultancy, very clear themes have emerged about what this organization as a whole both values and does not value about leadership. The platform is now formed for taking those conversations and understandings forward in enhanced leadership behaviours by everyone at WDC for the benefit of the community in Waimate District. This will involve continuing to exhibit behaviours identified as desirable and effective, and beginning new actions that will improve outcomes in the future, whilst also stopping those that are adding no value or being counterproductive.

Solutions offered by this consultancy are best described as a set of recommendations for the SLT to consider to help take the understandings forward in actual leadership behaviour. WDC has now thoroughly surveyed and considered the views of staff. There is a very clear call for leadership action. It is only through action, followed by reflection, learning and new action, that improved leadership behaviours will make a big difference to WDC performance.

Assessment of Results and Outcomes achieved

The workshop sessions with the WDC staff and managers were a pleasure to run. All front line leaders were actively engaged in leadership conversations and were curious and thoughtful about what they could do differently to lift their leadership intentions, behaviours and results. Similarly, almost all staff were highly receptive to the workshops and there was expression of appreciation in these and the front line leader workshops about the foresight of the SLT in embarking on the HPWI programme of work. Only a couple of staff expressed concern that the sessions were not relevant to them; and as noted earlier, this was in the midst of general consensus that all staff at WDC needed to demonstrate good leadership. Anecdotal feedback on the day of the staff workshops was that some people from the morning session were already talking about what they could do to be more leader-like as they went about their work in the afternoon.

The SLT were focused in their discussions and regretful of the need to finish the session earlier than originally planned. They expressed commitment to scheduling a special meeting to discuss the recommendations from the consultancy report and decide future actions.

WDC has fed back that the programme has provided a basic grounding in leadership behaviours and staff now have a clearer understanding that everyone in the organisation exercises leadership. WDC also felt the burden of two concurrent consultancies and in hindsight would have preferred a single consultant relationship.

The Way Forward (90-day and 180-day implementation expectations)

During the next 90 days it is expected that the action plan for progressing leadership behaviours will be agreed and prioritised, firstly by considering the recommendations made in the consultancy report. In particular, and as noted earlier, a recommendation includes developing the good leadership examples work into an aspirational leadership behaviour model for WDC. Ideally development of such a model would begin during the next 90 days.

During the next 180 days it would be ideal to take the aspirational leadership behaviour model forward through considering how the ideas can be embedded in everyday conversations and key culture and development tools used by WDC. It is also hoped that progress can be made on the recommendations about resourcing and providing leadership training to front-line managers, and an action-learning-and-leadership-coaching-rich development programme for senior managers. In the same period it is expected that some reciprocal demonstration of the desired behaviours would be visible across the organisation.

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