

## **HR Standard 1.19**

### **HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM BUILDING IN A COUNTY CHILD WELFARE AGENCY**

#### **PHILOSOPHY**

The recruitment and retention of child welfare workers is a well known and universal challenge. Recent studies have shown that salary, caseload, and a limited number of qualified individuals are significant pieces of the puzzle. In a recent survey of state, private and county child welfare agencies, the lack of effective, ongoing communication and a feeling of being appreciated in a stressful employment climate rank high on the list of factors which make retention a difficult challenge. When employees feel their ideas count, they are more likely to be productive, maintain a higher level of morale, and are less likely to leave for other jobs. Agencies must continuously communicate information to employees and also be willing to listen to and act on information and ideas presented by staff. One strategy to engage employees is to establish a team building model of employee involvement.

A high performance team building process offers an environment for workers and management to focus on total quality in the delivery of services by being responsible individually and together in a process of continuous improvement. Within a unionized environment, the team building process involves a cooperative labor-management relationship in which both union and employer realize that the success of the organization and the ability to retain skilled employees are in their common interest. Union and management become partners within the team building framework.

#### **OUTCOME**

When staff and agency leadership are effectively communicating and working toward common goals, the outcomes for children, families, and communities will improve and staff is more likely to remain in the employment of the PCSA because they feel valued and supported.

#### **APPLICATION**

- The PCSA and the agency bargaining agent, must make a commitment to support and participate in the process.
- A Steering Committee which included equal numbers of management representatives and union participants must be created to oversee the effort.
- Steering Committee members must be trained in a variety of areas including the development of good communication skills, problem solving, and decision making using a consensus based model.
- With the assistance of labor and management, an organizational assessment survey is developed in order to determine the staff's perception of the state of the agency. This survey

should raise critical issues which impact the agency's ability to retain a high quality workforce.

- A significant majority of the agency's staff needs to complete the survey. The results should then be compiled and shared with all employees in a series of open meetings. PCSA Board members, the administration and others should also be briefed on the survey results.
- Following the presentation of survey results, Steering Committee members should lead employee focus groups in an in-depth discussion of the results and solicit ideas and suggestions for building on the strengths identified by the survey and addressing the perceived areas of weakness.

Following this initial work, employees may state that this is the first time their input was solicited and results openly publicized and discussed. The implementation and use of survey itself can lead to an overall improvement in employee morale and expectations that the team building process may, in the future, allow for a more informed and engaged agency staff.

Following the survey and focus group discussions, the Steering Committee, with the assistance of the consultants, has the data to suggest the following challenges to employees, management and the board.

- There is a need for increased information sharing with employees. Better information will lead to better understanding and support of management decisions.
- Employees may be undecided about whether labor and management are truly committed to a cooperative process. Joint, ongoing efforts to build upon this initial success are needed to reverse these perceptions.
- Employee involvement in decision making and better communication through a cooperative team building process can help to reverse remaining perceptions that management will not take employee input into account when making decisions.
- An evaluation of training needs is necessary since more than half of the staff does not agree that they are adequately trained. The Individual Training Needs Assessment of the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program should be included by all direct service and supervisory staff. Once completed, this data can be supplemented by other information and surveys. This data should be shared openly with all staff members.
- There is likely to be a perceived need among the staff for employee recognition for excellent casework. Employees may also feel monetary and non-monetary rewards are important in certain circumstances. These suggestions should be considered and acted upon when possible and appropriate.
- An internal agency newsletter and other two-way communication tools must be developed to demonstrate that the team building approach is not a passing fad, but will become

integrated into the daily operation of the PCSA.

- The team building project must be customized to reflect the mission and goals of the agency. Labor and management must be committed to training agency staff in team communication skills, problem solving, conflict resolution, consensus-based decision making, group process, and conducting effective meetings.  
Participation should be voluntary but encouraged
- Previously existing agency committees should be examined to assess each one's value and utility. Those committees that are not useful and do not contribute value under this new approach should be discontinued or folded under the umbrella of the team building project. In-house staff should be selected to attend a facilitator training program. Once trained, these individuals will provide facilitation assistance to committees, departments and units outside of their normal work areas in order that they may be objective and neutral in the problem solving process.
- Proven consultants may be retained, through a separate contract, to train the agency's Quality Assurance Committee in consensus-based decision making and a team building approach. This committee includes board members, management and line staff.
- Other critical support pieces are necessary to ensure the success of the project. Intensive training of agency supervisors and department administrators in a team-based approach to managing which included such notions as mentoring, coaching and open communication skills.
- Union and management can agree to adopt the team building concept into the labor management meeting process. Members of the labor-management committee should be trained in team building knowledge and skill before being granted a seat on the labor-management committee. An agreement should be signed by management and union which expresses a joint commitment to the team building process.
- In all likelihood, there will be concerns of staff, who support the team building process, to finding the time to participate in committee work while maintaining a full case load. Numerous potential solutions may be incorporated to address this concern. Some of these may include: ensuring that supervisors support and encourage staff participation; establishing a pool of overtime monies to allow employees adequate participation opportunities while maintaining caseloads; more flexible work hours; sharing home visits within units; controlling paperwork through automation or a reorganization of the clerical pool; creating a reward system for team work accomplishments; including team building participation and other committee activity in all position descriptions of the agency; and numerous other proactive possibilities. Prioritization of the many possibilities should occur jointly and strategies to integrate them into the agency should be developed.
- The implementation process should be continuously monitored and evaluated. Adjustments should be made as necessary to ensure the continuous improvement of its quality.