

## ***Community Building at the Department of Community Affairs***

The New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA) is a large, complex organization with nearly 1,000 employees divided into 8 separate divisions with widely different missions and cultures. Efforts to create a feeling of community within the Department based on such core values as open communication, trust, and respect faced many tough challenges.

Yet, as the DCA marked its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1997, a need for community building was very apparent throughout the Department. Employee complaints about a lack of trust and weak communications and management concerns over high turnover and weak employee motivation called out for constructive intervention and fundamental changes.

Then Deputy Commissioner Steve Sasala saw these as symptoms of fundamental problems of an agency that had grown old and developed hardened habits and attitudes. One of the most troubling problems was a widespread sense of an absolute hierarchy that allowed for little or no input from employees. This contributed to the notable lack of trust between employees and supervisors. Sasala realized that changes were needed to empower employees and to make them believe that DCA was truly “their organization” and that they needed to participate in making the Department a “better place for all of us.”

Changing the culture of DCA would necessitate a significant effort, and it would require a strong outside perspective. Therefore, in late 1998, Angelo Lewis, who is highly experienced with large group interventions, was called in as a facilitator to lead the “Community Building Initiative” at DCA.

Using proven group methods, Lewis led DCA management and staff members through a multi-step process involving identifying and prioritizing issues, developing action plans, creating working committees, developing recommendations, and fostering implementation of the recommendations. One of the key components was a daylong assessment meeting, which brought together about 60 stakeholders from all constituencies within the Department. Based on the prioritized themes generated at the meeting, working groups/committees were formed to address important concerns. Over the course of about six months, the committee participants produced a list of recommendations, and a structure was established to enable implementation.

Two and one-half years after the CBI began, community building continues energetically at DCA and has become thoroughly institutionalized. Community building is now part of the culture, recognized as important by both management and staff. It is an essential aspect of policy decisions and program development in the Department. Commissioner Jane M. Kenny summed up the positive impact of the CBI in her message to employees in the CBI Annual Report for the Year 2000: “The Community Building Initiative has been a welcome addition to DCA. The process has allowed us to take a close and honest look at our internal operations and determine where we can make improvements to better our work environment . . . [It] has been instrumental in reforms from a department-wide open door policy to a bilingual customer service team and will help ensure that logical workplace advancements continue to occur.”

Two of the hallmarks of the changed approach at DCA are the creation of a new Office of Community Relations designed to further the goals of community building and the evolution of the original Community Building Task Force into a permanent Community Building Round Table. The Round Table currently consists of seven representatives of top and middle management and seven representatives of the “rank and file.” They meet monthly to consider recommendations drawn from eight committees and to produce proposals for implementation by the Department.

Perhaps the most popular outcome of the CBI thus far is the creation of the Alternative Work Week Program (AWP). This new program originated out of a recommendation by the Human Resources Working Group, which considered family/work issues as part of its portfolio.

The AWP responds to employee needs for flexibility in their work schedules to allow time for personal and family demands. The AWP allows employees to structure their schedules to include one day off during each two-week period, as well as permitting flexibility in using holiday time.

Before it became a permanent option, the AWP was operated on a pilot basis for a year and then evaluated with input from the Community Building Round Table’s Alternative Work Week Evaluation Committee. The program has been very well received and represents a significant empowerment for employees. One appreciative participant said, “The personal benefit I enjoy the most about AWP is the opportunity to ‘be in control’ of my own schedule. This is a real morale booster! Mental health and an attitude of well being are both affected in a positive way with this program.”

At a broader level, the general atmosphere at DCA is more trusting and respectful. This positive development is reflected in the new DCA Pledge. The Pledge states, in part, that all employees of the Department are committed to the core value of respect for co-workers and clients: “We practice mutual respect by setting a personal example of trust and fairness, recognizing the dignity of others.”

In a more subtle way, the CBI process has encouraged managers to respect the abilities and potential of staff, especially those who have been actively involved in the Task Force and its working groups and, later, in the Round Table and its committees. Initially, there was deep skepticism among some managers about involving rank and file employees in activities with direct policy (and budgetary) implications.

The manifest success of the CBI and the positive working relationships that have developed among the members of the Round Table have helped dispel that attitude and, have, instead, heightened respect and admiration for the talented individuals at all levels of DCA. Indeed, in a number of cases, employees who participated in the CBI have been given new responsibilities and even new positions based on their exemplary performance in the process.

Ivette Edwards, for example, who became involved in the CBI initially as a support person to one of the members of the Task Force, has now become Chair of the Training Committee. She has experienced better communications and employee empowerment first hand: “The whole approach

has changed. Now we're more open to trying things in new ways with input from more people. The message is 'We need your voice, your opinion to make things better.'"

Overall, the culture of DCA has been positively changed as a result of the CBI. Awareness of community needs and individual and organizational efforts to address those needs have increased dramatically. To take one key example, more open communications, once identified as an essential need in the Department, have become a part of the new culture. This has led to the establishment of a new Open Door Policy. As one director described it: "The door to the office of any unit supervisor, Bureau Chief, Director, or Commissioner is always open to any person who has a personal concern, one about the unit, an idea for improving the effectiveness of what we do, or just the need for more information . . . It is not a burden or a bother; it is an essential aspect of any successful organization."

To further enhance communications in the Department, there is also a new Community Building suggestion box, which has already generated recommendations for consideration by the Round Table. In addition, a bulletin lists events and thereby enhances awareness of activities in other divisions. It also posts a "Question of the Month" for comments from the community. A recent request for suggestions on how to motivate and reward employees drew 33 responses, ranging from a simple "thank you" to awarding points towards time off, education, or training.

According to current Deputy Commissioner Anthony Cancro, the most positive outcome of the CBI has been that "people who would not normally be talking with each other now talk to each other." Top management, middle management, and rank and file representatives serve together on the Round Table and work well together. Cancro also cites the Open Door Policy as a success. He gave the example of a clerical worker from the first floor who now felt empowered enough to meet directly with him to express her concerns, something that never would have happened before the CBI. "As long as I am here, it will continue. And my hope is that it has been institutionalized. You can't solve problems unless you have dialogue and communication. As long as we have the Community Building Round Table, we will have both."