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Labour Relations – The PR Fit

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Rod Stanley, APR

Christina Winsor, APR

The last thing any employer wants to see



Presentation Overview

1. Introductions
2. Case Study – PEI Health System Restructuring
3. Labour Relations and PR – the New Brunswick Collective Bargaining Model
4. Questions/Discussion

The PEI Health System Restructuring

The PR fit in Labour Relations

Case Study

PEI Health System Restructuring

- PEI Health System Restructured - 2005 to 2006
- to help manage and contain growing budget needs for front line health services
- Four health regions and one Provincial Health Authority restructured to a single department
- Six month window of initial transition - employees given notice April, 2005, basic restructuring complete by November, 2005

The HR challenges

- 320 employees receive termination notice – mostly administrative positions
- 170 new administrative positions posted within the new structure
- System downsized by 150 positions

The general challenges

- Managers/Admin staff the most affected – generally within corporate and finance
- Voluntary Severance Packages resulted in retirements and staff departures during restructuring process
- Multi-site and shift work environment posed communication challenges

The general challenges

- Some staff were securing employment in and outside the health system while others remained uncertain of their status
- Communications, HR, and Senior Management tasked to be key change agents – while being affected by restructuring

Stakeholder groupings

Key stakeholders

- Management/
Administrative staff
- Unions

Secondary Audiences

- Physicians
- Public
- Media
- Non-affected staff

Internal Relations

- Deputy Minister – primary internal messenger of new developments in restructuring process
- Public Service Commission and HR Transition Team representatives – provided face to face/ one-on-one communication with those affected
- Directors conducted divisional town halls
- Staff support programs introduced
- Branded change management materials

External relations

Media relations

- Designate spokespersons - Health Minister and Provincial Treasurer
- Key messages and spokesperson Q & As updated regularly
- Timely response to media and public inquiries

Three Key messages

1. This effort is a cost saving measure to help meet budget targets, increase administrative efficiencies, and maintain front line services.
2. We recognize this is a challenging time for those affected by restructuring and the organization will make every effort to provide supports to staff.
3. We are working closely with unions to ensure this transition is accomplished with the least possible impact on healthcare services and staff.

Employee Support Strategies

- Established a HR transition support team
- Offered proactive Employee Assistance Programs
- Offered workshops: Coping with Change, Job Search, and Effective Interviews
- Public Service Commission key part of the transition team

Communications Rep

- Contributed strategic communication voice for the Transition Support Team, Government Management Committee, and Senior Management tables
- Close relationship with Public Service Commission
- Close relationship with Labour Relations reps/union liaisons

Communication Tactics

- Developed a Communications Sub-Committee (PR peer group) to help strategize communication efforts
- Group and individual staff briefings/ updates
- Divisional Town Halls as milestones occur
- Management walkabouts

Communication Tactics

- Media lines/ speaking points developed for CEOs/ Ministers/ Executive Directors
- Position site HR reps as primary staff liaison for specific concerns
- Ongoing updates of Org. Charts

Communication Tactics

- Most affected staff were on e-mail - became a prime vehicle for information updates
- General staff communiques from Management to divisional staff (unaffected)
- Designated union liaisons - HR staff, labour relations reps, lawyers

Communication Tactics

- Communicate new learnings EARLY. When decisions are finalized – promptly share those decisions
- Clear explanation of employee options – mostly through face to face or one-on-one dialogue.
- Consider that each staff member's challenge was a personal one.

Union Involvement

- Privy to decisions prior to general or affected staff
- Work on building trust through fostering two-way and open communications
- Provided advanced written material whenever possible

Union Involvement

- Share staff messages/information with Union Leaders – prior to general distribution
- Unions actively involved in the development of legislation and the Health Employees Act which governed the transition process for employees

Lessons Learned

- Face to face (one on one) communication more effective than group or mass communications
- Recognize that staff cope with change in different ways
- Always keep one step ahead of the curve
- Encourage staff time to support one another

Lessons Learned

- HR rep became most important and trusted information resource for affected staff
- Website - only use if maintained on a regular basis
- Info Line/ E-mail Info – low value
 - impersonal and intimidating for some
- Bring groups together only when new or significant information is to be conveyed

Lessons Learned

- Q & A approach did not work. Each person had their own unique challenges – questions could never be completely covered
- Avoid speculation in messaging

The New Brunswick collective bargaining model

The PR fit in Labour Relations

The NB Environment

- Centralized negotiations for all unionized government employees
- 22 bargaining units representing over 9,250 employees
- De-centralized communications

Typical Employer Communications

- Hoping labour issues would disappear rather than communicate openly about them.
- ‘No comment.’
- ‘Can’t discuss details in public because it will jeopardize the negotiations process.’

A New Way of Communicating

- Proactive
- Anticipatory
- Honest, frank and open
- Clear, consistent and timely
- Link deal with operational activities
- Show flexibility in bargaining position

The turning point in NB

- The arguments for something new
 - “Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”
 - If you don’t tell your story, someone else will

Challenges

- Government had a negative collective bargaining reputation
- Teachers are well-liked and respected by the public
- Labour Relations practices and regulations do not allow you to speak directly to employees
- The details of the proposal are secret
- Dynamic nature of collective bargaining – many sub-issues, background is often needed to understand the current situation, ever-changing status of proposals

Objectives

- Effectively communicate status of negotiations including the negotiations process and any secondary issues that may arise
- Present convincing messages that the employer's offer is beneficial for all involved
- Improve media coverage to be more balanced and positive than in the past

Audiences

- Taxpayers
- Parents and students
- Teachers

Key Messages

- Four themes for messaging
 - Government is fair on wages and committed to the negotiations process
 - Government is committed to education and class composition
 - Government respects teachers and their issues
 - Concern that union is not communicating with membership

Approach

- Focus on media and additional forums to speak to all audiences without directly communicating with employees
 - Media
 - Legislative Assembly
 - Pre-Budget Tour
 - Advertising

The Results

- Improved media coverage
 - 47% positive media coverage, 31% neutral, 22% negative
 - Spokesperson quoted in 63% of stories, plus background material used in 53%
- No negative impact on government's position in the polls
- Media support for communications campaign

Lessons Learned

- Research – do your homework in advance and gain intelligence on your adversaries and audiences
- Make it simple (or as simple as possible)
- Eradicate uncertainty and act immediately—communicate and communicate often
- Build media relations

Lessons Learned

- Be ready for anything and everything
- Do not forget secondary issues
- Be aware that decisions may have inadvertent impacts
- Look for opportunities and play up weaknesses
- Be sensitive to the impact of words

PR's fit in Labour Relations – Your role as a PR professional

- Be at the table and on the 'issue' team
- Forecast issues – Anticipate what your audiences and opponents will do next
- Keep your finger on the pulse – never stop monitoring and analyzing
- Assure a good flow of both inward and outward communication
- Build rapport with key groups
- BE HONEST

Questions and Discussion