

VIEWPOINT

Listen Up

When employees make sound business cases for change and managers respond, agencies improve.
BY CHUCK CASTO

In less than five years, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Region II Division of Reactor Safety in Atlanta has moved from "bad enough to be noticed as bad" to best in class in many ways. The division of about 80 engineers has conducted safety inspections for nuclear reactors in the southeastern United States for the past 25 years.

By 2000, we had drifted from our mission. Even when we planned, we could not execute. We were not asking the important questions. We were too compartmentalized. Our teams were not drawing on each other's expertise. Our regional administrator decided that the solution to our organizational problems was not merely to change the people at the top, but to change the culture. Instinctively, we knew that job satisfaction and employee involvement needed to be key components in improving performance and productivity. We decided to take four actions:

- Advance our management skills.
- Give people the tools they needed to do the job.
- Identify and remove procedural barriers that hindered high performance.
- Strengthen staff involvement in improving performance.


We rejected the usual approaches—all-hands meetings, performance reviews and surveys—because they seldom bring immediate or effective responses. Instead, we found a workshop provided by Ken Amitin of Atlanta-based consultants Organizational Services Corp. In a nonthreatening setting, staff members built a reasonable business case for a single thing they needed to improve their job satisfaction and productivity. Then, they discussed their ideas with supervisors. In a separate workshop, supervisors and managers learned to listen, discuss and respond appropriately to those ideas.

Surprisingly, it was staff members who generated more ideas on what they could accomplish themselves to improve the agency. We focused on getting people the

tools they needed and eliminating barriers to high performance. For example, while driving back roads around nuclear plants looking for radiation monitors, inspectors sometimes got lost, a frustrating waste of valuable time. During the workshop, two inspectors requested a GPS device, which we bought. This small investment soon paid for itself many times over.

Other inspectors suggested a way to reduce the costs and hassles incurred when our licensees mailed us plant design drawings in preparation for inspection visits. The inspectors proposed that plants send us drawings on compact discs, and suggested that we buy a full-scale drawing printer. We made the changes, and today, we get our inspection material electronically.

While we believed we were making substantial progress, managers needed objective data on the impact of our efforts. A progress evaluation two months after the workshop showed we were making strides. A growing percentage of staff agreed or strongly agreed that they could count on co-workers to coordinate skills and expertise, that they had greater work variety, and that the pace and schedule of their work was more conducive to high performance and job satisfaction. Employees said managers encouraged and supported their creativity.

We learned that when employees partner with management to make even small improvements in performance and job satisfaction, the cumulative impact can be significant. Staff members learned that supervisors were serious about listening and were willing to make changes. Managers learned the importance of giving employees undivided attention. Our process has helped us move toward a new culture in which employees make sound requests based on business needs, and managers listen and respond appropriately. We have opened the door to an ongoing dialogue that we can reinforce and build on. 

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