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Making social committees work

Pros outweigh cons of well-organized employee committees

By Danielle Harder

Change is never easy for a workplace, especially when several organizations are amalgamated into one.

So, when the process of merging the Fraser River, North Fraser and Vancouver Port Authorities (VPA) started over the past year, the VPA social committee stepped in to ease the transition for employees.

The group sponsored bus tours of each location, a joint Christmas dinner and dance and open houses at all three office locations.

“(It was) kind of a meet and greet, just a couple of hours in the late afternoon to have something to eat and get to know each other,” says Anne McMullin, director of corporate communications for the VPA and a former social committee member. “We also did a drum café where everybody came together and a company came in and we had everybody — literally — beating to the same drum.”

Involving the social committee during this process has been crucial to building morale and creating a common culture among the three workplaces, says McMullin.

“The social committee will augment or complement the work that HR might be doing or communications is doing,” she says. “So this is the employee side of a communications initiative or HR initiative. We recognize, particularly if it’s around change, that it’s best coming from everyone.”

That the VPA social committee has been instrumental to this process is not surprising. The company-subsidized group has been active since 1980, organizing everything from family skating days and summer barbecues to a games lunch on Halloween and lunch-and-learn sessions throughout the year.

The committee likes to mark special days in some way, says McMullin. “Valentine’s Day might be as simple as a chocolate on everyone’s desk.”

Committees can be part of workplace fabric

Social committees, once seen as little more than a group responsible for buying get-well cards, are increasingly becoming part of the workplace fabric.

Eileen Chadnick, leadership coach and founder of Toronto-based Big Cheese Coaching, says social committees serve many functions, whether it’s boosting the culture of an organization — making it a fun place to work, for example — or acting as an “engagement driver” between departments.

“We kind of get stuck in our silo. We don’t always know who these people are,” she says. “We know that they have a job — this one’s an accountant, that one’s a marketer — but it’s about relationship building

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and often the work will be better when you have a better sense of who works and lives on the other side of the silo.”

This function is even more critical in a time when e-mail has replaced face-to-face conversations, says Chadnick.

“What about who they are as people? There’s absolutely nothing wrong with knowing so-and-so loves *Grey’s Anatomy* and the other one in that department has a son who’s training for the Olympics,” she says. “It adds up for such a richer work experience when people know each other as people.”

Helping employees ‘shine and stretch’

Social committees are also a useful tool for discovering employee strengths, says Chadnick. Volunteering can often help an employee “shine and stretch” outside of her traditional role, she says.

“By heading up a particular event or initiative, they can demonstrate various competencies that showcase their abilities that may not be evident in their traditional, day-to-day work,” she says, adding that getting involved in a social committee can also help workers build a better profile within the company and become known by other departments.

Of course, from an employer standpoint, there’s also the potential for better employee buy-in, as discovered by the Vancouver Port Authority. Chadnick had a similar experience while coaching homebuilder Tribute Communities.

The first stage of the project involved creating corporate values. The second part was implementing them, with the support of employees.

“We heard about things like, ‘We’d like more opportunities for camaraderie’ and knowing each other better and having a little more fun,” she says.

A recruitment boost

Social committees are also becoming an important facet of the recruitment strategy for many organizations, which proudly boast about their social sides on websites and promotional materials.

The VPA promotes the virtues of its nearly 30-year-old social committee whenever it can, says McMullin.

“It has to be seen as a fun place, where people enjoy time with colleagues,” she says. “There’s certainly a lot more focus around quality of life.”

That being said, McMullin says even the best social committee needs parameters. The VPA, for example, has a no-alcohol policy for social events. While activities are meant to be fun, the social committee aims to be more than a party organizer, she says.

“It has to bring value to the employees and make a connection to the workplace and your personal space,” she says.

Of course, Chadnick also cautions that social committees need to be respectful of the line between being social and invading personal space — not everyone wants to know their colleagues intimately.

Don’t let the committee become a clique

There are integral elements to creating a solid, purposeful social committee, says Chadnick. The first is that it must involve all departments to avoid resentment. Second, the social committee can’t become a social clique.

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“You have to create a welcoming environment so that if people want to be involved, there are ways to involve anyone who wants to be,” she says. “Don’t make it closed door. Be open to anybody who wants to contribute.”

Chadnick recommends rotating volunteers — by having only a few positions turn over at a time — to allow for diversity and new ideas.

Finally, Chadnick says management and employees have to agree on guidelines in advance. While the best social committees operate at arm’s length, she says they have to remain true to the organization’s core values.

“(We have to) set some guidelines for how we want to be on this committee, in advance. What if we disagree? How do we want to work that out? Is it consensus?” she says.

As always, Chadnick recommends good communication between employees and management, on everything from the time allowed for social functions, to how they are paid for — by employee or employer — to how much the organization is willing to contribute.

“Sometimes you’ll have people complain because they can’t please everybody but I think error of omission might be worse than error of commission,” she says.

“So you want to work on making that social committee great — and get as many people involved as you can — versus people coming to work and there not being that sense of community, collaboration or fun.”

Danielle Harder is a Whitby, Ont.-based freelance writer.