

A multifaceted program of change at Sydney's Ku-ring-gai Council has brought tangible improvements in staff engagement and service provision.

# Passion & progress

By Lisa Dyer

**K**u-ring-gai Council, in northern Sydney, is transforming its organisational culture into one that is more focused on service with a system-wide overhaul over the last three years. Planning, leadership, structure, performance management and communication have been the main areas of focus.

When HR manager Maureen Ayres joined the council, industrial relations was at the top of her agenda. This necessitated significant resourcing from the general manager and directors.

To get a better understanding about the internal drivers, staff were surveyed using the climate survey from Macquarie University's Voice Project as part of a number of initiatives. They were asked about their level of engagement (passion), perception of the council's bottom-line results (progress), and various other management practices.

Staff reported that they liked the kind of work they did, it gave them a feeling of personal accomplishment and they were willing to put in extra effort for the council. Overall, they felt they had good working relationships with co-workers and worked well as a team.

After an intensive workshop, the council decided on the areas of focus that would be the best use of time and resources to enhance organisational performance.

John McKee was appointed as general manager just prior to the first survey in 2006. The organisation was restructured and, in response to staff feedback, changes were made around leadership and communications. The general manager and directors aimed to be more visible and accessible. They attended more meetings and social events with staff in different areas. Also, a three-phase leadership

program was undertaken to improve the skills of directors and managers in areas such as leading change, presentation and coaching. All staff also received training in handling change.

Business management planning was revamped through discussion with managers and staff, and it was important that all staff were involved. As a result, the significant strategies and operational issues were more clearly articulated. The reporting system was developed online and updated regularly. It is now used as the agenda for team meetings, recognised in work plans and is more pertinent to the council's day-to-day operations, as well as providing for medium to long-term timeframes.

Greater emphasis was placed on communication by modernising the community customer newsletters and updating the website. The community was regularly briefed about such things as council events and other initiatives such as sustainability projects.

The look and feel of the council's internal communications was redesigned, the intranet implemented and ad hoc staff newsletters kept employees informed about legislative and other developments that affected them—for example workforce planning and industrial coverage.

A collaborative working group was established to redesign the performance appraisal system. Extensive changes included linking job tasks with management goals, and operational plans with specific timeframes and measures to provide greater objectivity and ease in assessing staff performance. Monetary rewards were to be paid only when all criteria were met. Support from the three relevant unions was sought and achieved. In anticipation of the launch of the new system this year, performance appraisals were brought up-to-date and allocated a common appraisal time period.

AFTER 14 MONTHS, McKee and the directors wanted to see how they were tracking in changing organisational practices. In a second survey in late 2007, staff reported increases in engagement and bottom-line results.

Employees indicated that the drivers of organisational performance that had improved over this time included:

- **Leadership:** More staff believed the general manager and directors kept people informed about what was going on, listened to other staff and were good role models. More employees were aware of the overall direction the general manager and directors had for the council.
- **Performance appraisals:** More employees felt their performance was reviewed and evaluated often enough, and that the way performance was evaluated provided them with clear guidelines for improvement.
- **Processes:** More staff felt there were clear policies and procedures for how work was to be done.

Meeting external goals has been improving in association with the increases in internal practices. The management plan in 2006-07 showed that 87.4 per cent of the key performance indicators had been met. For example, median development application process time had been reduced from 48 days in 2005-06 to 45 days in 2006-07. In 2007-08, 89 per cent of key performance indicators were met.

In response to staff feedback, Ayres' next step will be to look at the council's workforce planning and career succession planning. ●

Lisa Dyer is a senior consultant at Voice Project and honorary associate at Macquarie University. [lisa.dyer@voiceproject.com.au](mailto:lisa.dyer@voiceproject.com.au)