



Improving leadership, responsiveness, and innovative capacity will go a long way to creating an environment that attracts and retains employees. *Photo: Adobe Stock*

Lead to lift: Cultivating an engaged environment

Employees working in public administration are finding themselves at the centre of many conflicting pressures and public scrutiny – especially after the pandemic.

Local governments often face challenges while balancing the need to meet service levels and deliver programs with the priorities set by the government of the day and budget constraints. This extends into recruiting and retaining talented employees who are also being pursued by the private sector.

By its very nature as a public institution, government bodies – including local governments – are required to be fiscally responsible with taxpayer dollars. This leads to a restrictive recruitment environment – one often not able to compete with the private sector in terms of salary, benefits, flexibility, and other perks. Layer on top of this the high degree of public scrutiny and it's not hard to see why so many local governments are struggling to find and keep talent.

Over the years, it has been suggested that negative perceptions of government workers have created a challenge to cultivating an engaged workforce and positive workplace culture. For example, consider a mid-sized municipality spending \$10,000 for a staff appreciation lunch. The municipality then finds themselves under fire and defending the

use of taxpayer dollars. A private business would be criticized for not doing something like this. The different standard puts public service employees at a disadvantage compared to their private-sector counterparts. Many other differences like this exist and add to the difficulty the public service sector has in recruiting and retaining skilled employees.

How to Lift Workplace Culture

One of the main ideas is to make sure employees share in each other's success and are aware of the good work being done.

As human beings, we are innately wired to notice the negative as a means of survival – something psychologists refer to as the negativity bias. Positive experiences often pass unnoticed or are quickly forgotten. Elevating good news internally and publicly offsets this tendency to focus on the negative while also informing the public about the good work being done.

Along these lines, finding ways to clearly measure success helps both employees and the public see and appreciate progress. When goals and outcomes can be clearly articulated and quantified, benchmarks can be established, which can later be measured against.

In an environment where perks like performance bonuses aren't possible,

managers and leaders must get creative in finding ways to recognize a job well done. Employees who feel appreciated in a high-pressure, very public environment are more likely to stay and satisfied employees boost overall culture.

Changing culture is a relatively low-cost but extremely effective way to create an environment that attracts and retains employees. Adapting culture by improving leadership, responsiveness, and innovative capacity in what is traditionally a very inflexible environment will go a long way to creating a culture shift.

The last few years has shown culture and flexibility are at the top of the list for many job seekers and existing employees. Those who had access to flexibility during the pandemic want to keep it and it is expected by those looking for work. As a March 2023 article in *Policy Options* states, coping with these expectations requires a “change in activities, new decision processes and institutional arrangements, and, most fundamentally, adapting its culture.”



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Here are some key steps leaders and managers can use to approach this shift:

- **1. Revise outdated policies** – Some policies no longer reflect the work environment. New technology often means new policies.
- **2. Engage employees in preliminary discussions of process changes** – Ask for ideas and input and be willing to follow through with implementation.
- **3. Utilize internal resources to help drive innovation** – Employees will be more engaged if they feel they have a say and control over their work environment. As an added bonus, working together through this process also builds stronger teams.
- **4. Look for ways to continually embrace change and ideas** – Employees will remain engaged and feel valued if change is iterative and not "one and done."
- **5. Commit to continuous growth** – Regularly repeat steps 1 through 4.

Responding to Perceptions of Unfair Divisions of Labour

One of the factors impacting post-pandemic workplace culture is an unequal division of work, either real or perceived. This issue is seen more often if workplaces permanently adopt the hybrid work model.

Employees whose job requires them to be frontline can feel there's a disparity or level of unfairness between them and those who are able to work from home. Usually those who can work from home are in administrative or managerial roles, only adding to this sense of unfairness.

When employees feel there's an unfair division of labour or difference in what can be seen as a perk, it impacts performance and overall culture. The same feeling can arise when high performers are "rewarded" with more work. This so-called performance punishment can lead to resentment, disengagement, and

a negative culture. With a hybrid work environment, employees who are visibly present can end up being given more work by virtue of the fact they are there and not out of sight, out of mind.

This unequal division of labour and perception of unfairness be handled by:

- establishing a model where people rotate between office and home so there's shared responsibility;
- crosstraining employees so those on the frontline can be given a break once in a while;
- offering support for work-life balance and flexible work arrangements for all employees;
- creating a culture where it is okay for employees to say no if they feel they don't have the capacity to take on extra work; and
- reviewing responsibilities to see if there's an opportunity to shift some to create a better balance.

The common thread throughout all the above is good communication. A healthy workplace culture is one that supports, values, and encourages transparent and open communication. This creates the space to discuss challenges, ideas, and opportunities, and leads to all employees feeling seen and heard – no matter their role. [MW](#)

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