CASE STUDIES

A JOINT VISION FOR HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND WELFARE AT WORK

1. Organisations involved

Provincial Government of Antwerp

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

The changing labour market and new trends in human resources (HR) policy led the Personnel Department of the Provincial Government of Antwerp to change its operations and to formulate a new vision and new objectives. The social awareness of human capital within an organisation needed to be translated into a policy, in this case an HR policy. During discussions regarding the transformation from a classic personnel department into an HR department and the drafting of the strategic memo for 2007-2012, the joint objective 'the welfare of employees at work' kept on cropping up, thus creating the foundation for an excellent working goal.

When the HR department was implementing its new policy and drawing up its strategy for 2007-2012, it decided that it should strengthen its ties with the Internal Service for Prevention and Protection. After all, both departments have the same goal: the welfare of the employee at work. Since the introduction of the Belgian Welfare Act of 4 August 1996, prevention is no longer restricted to technical and material measures, but also covers the organisation of work, labour conditions, social relations and environmental factors. There is no doubt that employees work best in an environment where they feel 'materially and spiritually happy'. In addition, since the mid-1990s human resources management (HRM) has regarded a company's human capital as the production factor par excellence, which can offer a company or organisation a competitive advantage. HRM is thus becoming increasingly important in a company's strategy. A close involvement and the translation of the general organisational strategy into an HR strategy is thus essential.

2.2. Aims

The most important objective in the long term is to increase the employees' welfare and motivation. This will be achieved indirectly by bringing about better (daily) cooperation between both departments and to strengthen HRM as well as Prevention & Protection.

2.3. What was done, and how?

The joint vision as mentioned above targets three domains:

1. competence management;
2. balance between supply and demand of employees; and
3. safe and motivating labour conditions.

Thus the province's HRM policy ensures that:

- employees are sufficiently competent and motivated to contribute to the targets of the Provincial Government in an effective and efficient manner;
- the number of available employees and requirements are balanced in a proactive manner;
- provincial employees work under safe circumstances, for a salary that corresponds with the expected performance and in a working atmosphere that contributes to the employee's personal development and welfare.

A joint vision for HRM and Prevention & Protection required the reworking and rewriting of the strategic and operational objectives, which mainly focus on:

- implementation of the principles of competence management and the revaluation OO of the role of the line manager/HR manager, through a specific training course for (new) executives, among other measures;
- striving towards the best possible approach to staffing requirements, recruitment and career planning by recruiting the right person for the right job, by stimulating the principle of internal mobility and by rationalising the number of holiday schemes;
- strengthening team spirit by organising activities such as an annual family day ('Provant Plezant'), a monthly 'happy hour', group activities for each department, the 'Vermeylenfonds' and many activities by the personnel association, Prova;
- reactive and proactive improvement of working conditions through a constructive approach to absenteeism, a specific policy targeting older employees, etc.

A bi-weekly consultation was held between both departments and the Internal Department for Prevention and Protection was embedded in the organisational structure and moved to the same work floor as the HRM Department. This greatly strengthened collaboration between the two departments.

With the aim of reducing the number of working days lost due to occupational accidents by 50%, the Department for Prevention and Protection launched, in consultation with the HRM Department, a project known as 'Van Lijden naar Leiden' ('from suffering to leading). The objective was to increase the safety of working conditions, to reduce absenteeism related to occupational accidents and to accelerate the return to work. The project was initially launched in only a few locations, such as the Zilvermeer Provincial Recreational area (Mol), and consisted of 4 phases:

In the first phase, the project was presented to the management of the Zilvermeer. After some modifications done, the project was formalised and submitted for approval to the Committee for Prevention and Protection at the Workplace.[1] The Committee in turn put together an ad hoc working group consisting of line managers from the different function groups.

In the second phase, the ad hoc working group drafted a scenario for the realisation of the project. 'Order and cleanliness' was chosen as the main theme. The scenario envisioned the following steps:

- drafting and distribution of an introductory note on the project to the staff. This note was signed by the management and all line managers;
- inviting the staff to an information session on the project, its actions and goals;
- training for all line managers on their tasks and responsibilities, provided by the External Service for Prevention and Protection (IDEWE);
- a poster campaign in collaboration with a company known as Fullmark, containing the following monthly themes:

  'Veiligheid kent geen vakantie' (safety doesn't take holidays)

  'Orde en netheid elke dag opnieuw' (clean and tidy every day)

  'Laten we opruimen wanneer dat nodig is' (out of sight, out of mind)

  'Ik hou mijn werkplaats en materiaal proper' (I keep my workplace spick and span)

  'Een plaats voor alles en alles op zijn plaats' (a place for everything and everything in its place).

[1] A Committee for Prevention and Protection at the Workplace (Comite voor Preventie en Bescherming op het Werk/Comite pour la Prevention et Protection au Travail, CPBW/CPPT) is obligatory in companies with 50 employees or more and is a joint body. The committee looks after safety, health and the protection of the living and working environment, as well as the application of legislation relevant to this matter.

These posters were put in every department and workplace. Each theme was linked to specific actions for that month – these actions were planned in consultation between the line manager and his staff;

- a visualisation and follow-up of the targets throughout the year by means of a barometer (accident pillar) placed in the refectory. This accident pillar is a transparent tube 2 metres high, divided up into number of days. This tube is filled with white sand (symbolising the Zilvermeer recreation area) as lost working days occur. In one of the forested recreational areas of the Province a 'story-stick' is used instead to mark the number of lost working days.

In phase 3 the scenario was implemented. In the meantime, recording of the number of days lost to sick leave began.

In the fourth phase of the project, a final evaluation was made and some further actions were taken over personal protective equipment.

Following on from the 'Van Lijden naar Leiden' project, the next target was a constructive approach to absenteeism. The Antwerp Provincial Government chose to mainly pursue a preventive/proactive policy encouraging attendance at work, without ignoring unauthorised absenteeism. The role and responsibility of the people manager is essential, as is the support of the HRM department for line managers, such as training, involvement of social services, personal advice and guidance by the HR account manager as regards people management, etc.

2.4. What was achieved?

Many of the results of the new joint strategic choices and related projects are visible in the daily cooperation between the two departments. Collaboration is increasing spontaneously, and more attention is being paid to the employees' welfare. There are, however, no quantitative figures to illustrate this.

Figures on occupational accidents can reveal something about (un)safe working conditions. The accident frequency rate (number of accidents resulting in at least one lost day per one million working hours) and accident severity rate (number of real lost calendar days per thousand working hours) can therefore be used. The number of lost working days (number of days' sick leave) may also be an indicator for the satisfaction, motivation and involvement of workers in their job.

Table 1 shows the accident frequency and severity rates of the Antwerp Provincial Government, which has around 2,600 employees, between 2002 and 2006.

Table 1. Accident frequency and severity rates, 2002-2006

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Frequency rate	55	62	61	56	65
Severity rate	730	887	772	1275	1588

Table 2 shows the accident frequency and severity rate at the Zilvermeer site for 2005 to 2007. The 'Van Lijden naar Leiden' project was launched in 2006 as a pilot in this recreation area (see above). The objective was to halve the number of accidents and lost working days by 2007 compared to 2005.

Table 2. Zilvermeer accident frequency and severity rate, 2005-2007

Domain Zilvermeer	2005 (reference)	2006	2007 (1 August)
Frequency rate	8	4	2
Severity rate	202	189	11

The pilot project at Zilvermeer achieved its objectives, and the cost-benefit analysis appears to be positive as well. The only costs were the posters (produced by an external company), the

time spent by all parties (meetings, information sessions – about 350 man-hours in total) and the visualisation of the results (see above). This goes to show that good results are not always dependent on big budgets.

The effect in terms of changing attitudes within the organisation to safety, welfare, prevention and protection is difficult to measure. A new employee satisfaction survey has been scheduled to take place during the 2007-2012 legislature and will provide a more detailed picture of the effect and results.

Problems faced

Periodic checks carried out by the Department for Prevention and Protection in the various departments focus mainly on technical and material aspects. Labour relations and work organisation are barely covered during these company visits, which is understandable. The HR account managers, who bridge the gap between the HRM Department and other departments within Antwerp's Provincial Administration, have a better understanding of labour relations and work organisation, insofar as the executives involved discuss these themes with their HR account manager.

Because the theme of prevention and protection is not a typical HR process like recruitment and selection, training, etc. the involvement and concrete collaboration between the HRM Department and the Department for Prevention and Protection remains limited.

2.5. Success factors

Before 2000 the theme of OSH did not have a high priority within the organisation. People did not feel that they had much influence on the issue, or that they might be able to reduce risks in their own right. The 'Van Lijden naar Leiden' project, as well as targeting absenteeism, was aimed at highlighting this issue and emphasising the responsibilities of both ordinary workers and management in this area. By making the project concrete, involving all employees, and carrying out specific actions, the employees gained a greater sense of involvement. Both projects are still running.

The success of the projects was largely due to spirit of cooperation between the two departments concerned and a joint effort to achieve the same objectives, i.e. the best interests of the employee and the organisation. Collaboration is only possible when colleagues think of one another as allies with the same objectives, instead of as enemies with competing interests.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

This kind of project would be hard to integrate in other organisations, as it requires an assessment and a review of the vision and strategic objectives of the organisation concerned. This is likely to vary widely because each organisation has its own characteristics and its own specific culture.

Projects such as 'Van Lijden naar Leiden', tailored to the requirements of the particular company, would require the involvement of the management, a considerable focus on people management and a high level of cooperation between employees on the work floor. How this is achieved would depend on the company culture, but it definitely implies a top-down approach.

3. References, resources:

- http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/mainstreaming_osh_business