

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Culture Change: Communication is the Key

Emergency services are steeped in tradition, which, for the most part, is a good thing. Many tradition-rich organizations have deeply held beliefs and may be slow or even resistant to change. Emergency services organizations (ESOs) face challenges when attempting to change or enhance their work culture, with respect to safety, operations or personnel relations. Given the high risk and high stakes work environment, ESOs that remain static may be more vulnerable to work-related accidents, injuries, fatalities and lawsuits.

This communiqué explores best practices and solutions for ESOs that desire to successfully implement culture change and provide a safe and productive work environment.

Change – operational or personnel relations?

Cultural changes in the ESO work environment can typically be broken down into two broad categories:

1. **Operations/safety** – What measures can the ESO take to more safely complete the operational functions of the organization? Reasons to change operational or safety programs may include: high frequency, severity or risk of work-related accidents or injuries; risky behaviors while responding to and operating on emergency scenes; and/or new safety regulations, standards or laws.
2. **Personnel relations** – What steps can the ESO take to strengthen employee relations and morale and reduce exposure to work-related misconduct and litigation, such as harassment, discrimination, retaliation, wrongful termination, constructive discharge or failure to hire or promote? Changes to processes of personnel relations may be necessary as a result of: incidents of misconduct; high number of personnel grievances; adversarial and/or mistrusting relations between management and employees/volunteers; poor morale; and turnover.

Dealing with change

A certain portion of any workforce will be inherently distrusting of change and will work to preserve the status quo because “we have always done things a certain way around here, so why should we change?” Many people prefer predictability and will resist change, no matter how logical. Consequently, how to overcome resistance to change is a crucial component of any change management plan.

Communication is the key

When an ESO plans to implement a new policy, procedure or practice, it is important to effectively communicate to membership before, during and after the implementation process. Trying to pack everything into a single message introducing change in the workplace will likely be perceived as a unilateral directive.

This is a sample guideline furnished to you by VFIS. Your organization should review this guideline and make the necessary modifications to meet your organization's needs. The intent of this guideline is to assist you in reducing exposure to the risk of injury, harm, or damage to personnel, property, and the general public. For additional information on this topic, contact your VFIS Risk Control Representative at (800) 233-1957.

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Buy-in – Successful implementation of changes over the long term may be more successful with membership input and ownership. Modifications to workplace policies or practices that are mandated with little or no explanation will be poorly received.

Explain “why” change is needed – If ESO members don’t understand why change is needed, buy-in simply won’t be achieved. Personnel that understand and believe in the reasons for change may more positively and efficiently move in the desired direction. Clearly communicate the purpose and context of the change management effort, providing a vision of the benefits to the organization, personnel and community.

“WIIFM” – Help ESO personnel identify, “What’s in it for me (WIIFM)?” The customary resistance to change begins to disappear when people are clear about the benefits the change brings to them as individuals. Of course there is the need to understand how altering practices impacts the entire organization and community served, but it is also important to stress the advantageous impact on the individual.

Listen – Provide multiple opportunities and methods for personnel to ask questions, seek clarification and provide feedback. Communication involves two-way conversation, instead of management simply making a presentation. Being heard is essential for personnel to believe in organizational change.

Methods of communication – Older workers may complain about younger coworkers’ overreliance on electronic means of communication, such as text messages, social media and email. It is indisputable that face-to-face communications are becoming a lost art with many people in the modern electronics era. It is not recommended that an ESO fall into primarily communicating change primarily through emails, memorandums or the organization’s intranet. Effective communication does not hide behind technology.

ESO leaders are encouraged to conduct face-to-face meetings because demeanor and tone are pertinent in communicating why a change in safety, operational or personnel practices is necessary. There is value in being present in ESO members’ work environment to encourage questions and discussion.

How change will happen

After soliciting and integrating feedback from the ESO’s membership, paint a clear picture of what is going to happen and when. Define expectations by explaining the implementation strategy so personnel can see the road ahead. Anxieties are eased when personnel understand specifically what needs to be done and how.

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Monitoring and sustaining change Consider various methods to monitor the progress of the change management. These could include:

Training and education – Develop a training plan for all personnel on new or modified systems, procedures or policies. Progress of the workplace change can be measured in part through a well devised training program. In addition to formal training sessions, managers can constantly reinforce their availability to answer questions or concerns.

Performance reviews – Consider including adherence to and cooperation with significant changes to workplace rules, guidelines and processes in performance reviews. Those with supervisory responsibilities may be evaluated on their role with change management.

Commendations/Rewards – Recognize personnel for positive accomplishments and approaches to the work-related changes. Commendations can be communicated not only to the individual but also across the ESO to encourage similar actions or behaviors.

Coaching/counseling – Organizations commonly underutilize coaching and counseling as forms of performance management. If a worker is not complying with new or modified business practices, ESOs often jump to progressive disciplinary action rather than using non-punitive coaching and counseling. Personnel are typically more receptive to non-disciplinary methods of managing performance. Personnel working in good faith will generally take the coaching as guidance to do the job the right way.

Discipline – Particularly when instituting change within an organization, it is recommended that disciplinary action be taken more as a last resort. When appropriate, ESO leaders are encouraged to assign additional training or utilize non-punitive coaching or counseling before enacting discipline.

Conclusion

Making safety, operations or personnel changes can be very difficult and almost always resisted. It's important for ESO's leaders to credibly communicate the underlying business needs for change to skeptical personnel for successful implementation. In order to impact the culture of an organization, consistent and clear communication throughout the change process is the key.