



Nelson at play... the Arts Festival Carnivale

## Nelson City: focused on customer service and staff engagement'

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When Keith Marshall, chief executive of Nelson City Council is questioned about his organisation's vision for the future, he explains that the council's KPIs rest on two fundamental tenets.

The first that the city deserves an organisation focused on improving service performance and secondly, the city deserves an organisation that is inspired to do that.

In short, Marshall shows a genuine desire and belief to see his council become one that "delivers great customer service and has staff inspired to do this".

Having taken up the role of CE in 2008, one naturally assumes that Marshall's leadership style has a direct impact on the 240 council staff and their journey to delivering this vision, however, he says it is the people who are collectively making the council a better place to work and shies away from the

thought that it may be attributed to any one person's effort.

Delve into the changes that have been taking place within the organisation and one quickly sees that Marshall's hopes are not mere rhetoric and that the council has indeed begun its journey to not only making the city better for its citizens but also creating a better work place for its staff. One of the indicators is the recent staff survey undertaken with JRA (NZ) Ltd. Between 2009 and 2010, employee opinion has improved on a variety of workplace climate factors to the extent that the organisation has chosen to compare its scores to JRA's Best Workplaces Survey benchmark, comprising a mix of 245 private, public and not-for-profit organisations.

Stephen Gully, manager human resources and Erika Svarc, human resources advisor, reveal a few of the interventions that took place following the 2009 staff survey. The Council (as is typical of many organisations) had identified its mission, vision and values in 2006 which all staff contributed to.

However, despite this, Svarc says, "managers could not talk to it and the values never became ingrained in the way we do things here".

Late last year a different approach was adopted. Gully explains how the council opted for a 'purpose statement' approach which saw a group of fifty leaders working together to define the purpose of the council and how their business units and the work they perform contributes to this. From this came a purpose statement that was clearly understood by all staff and could be easily communicated: "We work to make Nelson a better place. Our residents understand that this is our intention. Everything in our attitudes and behaviours ensures the whole of council is successful, and each individual in the council has the opportunity to be successful."

Another significant intervention was the introduction of a leadership development programme which has seen 55 staff, including all managers, attend in the last year. Marshall puts the

programme in context: "It is all about personal leadership and ownership of what we do here. We think that 'leadership' is something everyone does and it is the individual attitudes and behaviours that make us who we are as an organisation."

One outcome of the programme "is business unit managers across the council getting on board with where the organisation is headed," explains Gully. He mentions the technical services business unit who have "set some pretty high goals". A key activity aimed at breaking down the silo mentality that often exists in organisations is a monthly afternoon team hosted by technical services to which members of a different business unit are invited each month. "They talk about their roles and what they do – something which has engendered understanding between teams", says Gully. The council's building department, under the leadership of Tracey Quinton Boundy, has seen team leaders use the purpose statement as a way to build team cohesion and align staff, resulting in employees, "aiming for the same thing – one unifying thing with everyone working together", according to Svarc.

Other indicators that things are changing is the number of written customer compliments the council receives. Marshall observes that there has been a surge of these in the last year, rising from the usual three to four per year to at least four dozen. Something attributed in part to the new customer service centre which opened

late last year. It is a 'one-stop shop' for customers who can now interface directly with key service personnel from the different business units who have been brought together under one roof. Svarc says it was a big shift in the way we did business, in our way of working and in the way we respond to customers. Gully agrees: "It is the physical manifestation of our efforts to serve our customers better. Through it one can see the purpose statement that the employees have worked so hard on bringing to life."

The centre also symbolises one of the four KPIs that Marshall has identified for the council – 'customer satisfaction'. This and another, 'staff satisfaction' have now become part of the organisation's language. "Since mid-2009, every employee has had a conversation with their manager as part of their formal performance review on how they can contribute to improving both staff and customer satisfaction. It's as much about personal leadership as organisational leadership", says Svarc.

This year's staff survey followed a period of great change, the council had reorganised – a mix of small and big changes, the customer service centre had opened and the council's remuneration structure had also undergone change. Despite this upheaval, staff were keen to voice their opinion with 96 per cent of staff responding to the survey. Even more encouraging, results showed that the proportion of engaged staff had increased by 50 per cent between 2009 and 2010, which delighted leaders at the

council who finally had evidence that "staff had really bought into the journey". When asked what might have influenced this shift, Svarc cites the benefits of JRA's key driver analysis, a process which identifies workplace climate factors that have the greatest impact on employee engagement.

"Knowing what these are provides a good framework for focusing our efforts and attention on the initiatives that will actually make a difference", says Svarc. A key driver from last year showed that staff were unsure if the organisation was interested in their views and opinions, something that prompted the council to revisit how well 'team briefings' were working. The result was a fine-tuning of the process coupled with educating staff on how to use team briefings as a channel for two-way communication – both getting information out fast and more importantly, a way for staff to feed information back to senior management. Cross-organisation project teams are also put in place when necessary and this provides another opportunity for collaboration across the council.

Marshall provides one final piece of positive news, 'In the same period, a council survey has shown that customers' perception of our general over-the-counter-service has lifted by over 50 per cent'. It appears that not only is the council gradually achieving its inspired workforce but also achieving its goal of providing strong service performance for its citizens.



Nelson Marina