

2009 NCSHA Award Nomination – Ohio Housing Finance Agency
Management Innovation – Human Resources
Effective Employee Communication and Engagement

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Connecting employees to a company's mission is a challenge for every business as the competition for customers tightens in weak economic times. For the Ohio Housing Finance Agency (OHFA), actively engaging employees to embody the mission was critical to communicating our public purpose to customers and earning their trust.

Engaging employees is more than just ensuring they are satisfied or motivated in their job. It is about helping them develop an emotional connection or sense of personal attachment to their work. Employees who do not feel a connection to their place of work can impact the morale of those around them and the entire organization. In an effort to engage all team members, OHFA created a comprehensive internal initiative led by the Organizational Culture and Leadership Committee (OCLC) that included surveys, communication campaigns and trainings.

Establishing a baseline of what the Agency staff members felt toward OHFA and the mission was critical before any changes could be made. An initial climate survey was conducted in 2006, which helped in developing nine overall themes that presented challenges to employee engagement. The themes identified were:

- Some individuals under-perform
- Staff members are overworked
- My work isn't related to the mission
- The union is a barrier
- Managers avoid conflict
- At least OHFA is trying
- There is a lack of trust among staff
- There is a "say vs. do" gap
- I am doing all I can, but it's the other guy

To begin addressing the themes and get more detailed information about workplace issues, an Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument was completed by both senior management and OCLC members. Working within an established framework helped determine the extent to which the Agency utilized collaboration, creativity, control and competition and where the senior leadership of the Agency felt OHFA should be headed. The results showed that the Agency desired more flexibility and increased external focus, collaboration and creativity, while a decrease was needed in the competitive and control. The outcomes of the assessment provided a guide for senior management to develop goals and strategies that would direct the future of the Agency.

Results of the assessment were shared with all staff members, who were encouraged to complete their own version of the assessment. Internal changes were made throughout 2008, providing tangible results to the efforts. Senior leadership and OCLC agreed that these changes were helping improve the morale of employees, but also realized that the nine themes were the root of a few larger issues—trust and overall employee engagement.

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Trust emerged as a concept integral to not only communicating with employees and customers but also to addressing the nine themes identified during an early survey of staff. To help increase the level of trust between employees at all levels within the organization, the Office of Administration provided the Franklin Covey “Leading at the Speed of Trust” and “Working at the Speed of Trust” training sessions to all employees. These trainings centered on the four cores of credibility: integrity, intent, capabilities, and results; allowing employees to gain insight into how they must first gain self awareness and build self trust before being able to extend and receive trust from others.

To get a better understanding of OHFA employee engagement, OCLC and senior staff members asked staff members to participate in a second survey in 2009. The survey provided a snapshot of engagement levels for the entire Agency and offered the opportunity for employee comments. Nearly 80 percent of the staff completed the survey with 70 percent of respondents saying they felt engaged with OHFA and its mission.

Increasing and maintaining these levels of engagement was important to providing a higher level of customer service. An Agency-wide communications campaign was implemented to convey the importance of the work done at every level of the organization. The goal of the initiative was to create a culture where all employees are “brand ambassadors,” communicating the Agency’s mission and purpose effectively and consistently. The initiative began the process of addressing existing communication gaps, creating a consistent brand message and heightening awareness of the importance of critical communication between departments, staff members and customers.

One of the first deliverables from the initiative was a video of OHFA customers telling their stories of how OHFA helped them achieve their affordable housing dreams, communicating the trust customers place in OHFA to provide them with the services and programs that make affordable housing options available. All employees at the Agency have one, unified goal to help low-to moderate-income Ohioans in need of affordable housing and the video helped to engage employees with this message.

Employees were also encouraged to submit stories of how and why our customers trust us, either from their own experience or from those of a customer. A newly- hired OHFA employee shared her personal story:

“Last year, I was given the blessing of being able to purchase a home. This is one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. There is nothing like coming home, to "my own home." I can decorate with my own special style and I was able to pick a house structurally designed to my taste. I've only worked for OHFA for two weeks and I'm proud to say that I work here. I'm excited to know that the work that I do with my teammates will let a customer enjoy and feel the same feelings I did, when I found my home. OHFA has a wonderful mission and I feel that my work makes a difference and really impacts other people’s lives.”

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The Agency continues the training and communications inventory for all aspects of internal and external communications vehicles associated with the initiative, working to convey consistent language to all OHFA customers. Other initiatives include a performance measure and additional trust related initiatives.

This comprehensive approach to employee engagement improves morale and customer service but also communicates the heightened public service role of each employee. When each employee has a personal and emotional connection to the service they provide, customer trust is earned and service levels increase. Innovation and collaboration within the Agency produce positive results, helping to make OHFA a leader in housing policy decisions. By connecting employees to the mission, OHFA helps to “open the doors to an affordable place to call home” for thousands of Ohio families each year.