

SIMPLIFYING THE ALBERTA VISION

"There is too much government inside government," Premier Ralph Klein told Ron Hicks when in 2004 Klein appointed him as Deputy Minister of Executive Council, the head of the Alberta Public Service.

Hicks agreed and believes clarifying and simplifying the vision and values of the public service is essential to address this issue.

Hicks spoke with us about fostering ethical behaviour and ensuring the new generation of executives has the right values.

Like the Premier, I feel very strongly that we have become too much a rules-based, controls-based organization and it was causing concern in the public service. For some, it was starting to become a barrier to doing their job, to being productive.

Because of Enron and other scandals, we saw a lot of rules and controls being added in private and public sector organizations. That was certainly the case in the Alberta Public Service. We aren't unique.

Every organization needs rules and controls and systems, but you will never have enough of them if you are a rules-based organization.

Someone will always think of a way around rule number 2.1 and then you end up with an addition, rule 2.1.1 and so on.

Employees can be far more productive and effective if they know that management will support them as long as they carry out their work consistent with our values and expected behaviours rather than constantly worrying about whether they will get in trouble for not following the long list of rules. We needed to get back to our values.

Our vision and our values statements are ten years old. We agreed we needed to update them. They need to describe the type of organization that both our current employees and those we're trying to recruit would like to be part of. We need to make them more succinct and sharp. In our discussion to date there seems to be some consensus developing around 'Making a difference together' or 'Making a difference for Albertans', a very simple vision along those lines.

Over the years our value statements have grown and we now have a number for the public service, and many departments added to those, and within departments, some divisions put in more detail. We need to return to a maximum of four to six value statements that will apply across government. Your values should be the same whether you're working in the finance or environment departments. You should not find a different set of values if you move to a new position in another department.

There's consensus that we need value statements around integrity and ethical behaviour, respect, accountability, innovation and creativity, collaboration and lastly, commitment to excellence.

We discussed this first with deputies and human resource directors in October and then held a full day session in December with the executive committees of all departments.

Now we'll engage staff in a discussion. Most of our deputy ministers and executives come from the same demographic. We want to make sure these value statements are something a

22-year old graduate can identify with and can say, "This is the kind of organization I want to work for, these are values and behaviours I can expect and respect."

In the past, my impression is that most staff didn't pay a lot of attention to values statements. We had them, we thought they were useful, but we did not make them a priority. Now we have a growing consensus that this is important to our future, not just to get away from the rules-based approach.

There's a strong sense that our success as a public service is going to depend on the type of corporate culture we have and that culture depends on the vision and values we put in place.

There seems to be a huge appetite for this discussion in the Alberta Public Service. Sometimes when you raise a new topic in a meeting, the room goes quiet. When we raised this issue with our executive committees, everybody jumped into the discussion. I was really impressed and pleased.

Now, we have to walk the talk. That's critical to be successful.

Sometimes organizations shy away from this kind of discussion because the minute an important decision is made that's inconsistent with the values, people question whether you're serious. That's why, although we need to engage the whole organization in this discussion, we started with the deputy ministers.

If they don't subscribe to the vision and the values, if they're not going to model the way, then it's not going to cascade through the public service.

Knowledge transfer

If there's one thing I wake up at night thinking about, it's the retirement issue. Can we get ready fast enough in terms of developing leaders or developing the skilled people we need in some of our key positions?

We recognize that knowledge transfer, both on a management level and a professional and technical level, is critical.

We have succession management plans in place in each of our departments. The challenge we have – and I'm sure this is the case with other public services – is that we didn't hire for quite a while. So we have this group of people – deputies, assistant deputies, directors, senior managers and various skilled professionals – many of whom are going to be leaving around the same time.

We have a leadership development program for our senior group that we are going to expand to all levels of the organization, and we will be incorporating our values statements into that – we'll be placing a lot of emphasis on values as part of leadership development in the future.

We're also looking at some positions on the professional/technical side, having those people come back on a part-time basis after they retire to help transfer knowledge to the people who are taking over.

Although we're still working on our values statements, we're recruiting to the values we want. We've filled two deputy positions in the last year with individuals from outside the public service. We recruited individuals with good experience and knowledge, but we also looked for the values we want in the public service. Both individuals have demonstrated that we made the right choice.

You can help develop skills but if you're not starting with someone who has the kind of values you're trying to instill in the public service, if there are issues with their integrity for example, that's pretty tough to overcome.

Employee protection

There has been some discussion about whistle blower protection legislation.

We have a code of conduct and ethics, so in effect we have whistle blower protection now.

The Public Service Commissioner and I occasionally get calls and letters complaining that someone in a leadership position is not acting consistent with the code.

We follow up on those and keep the name of the person who brought it forward in confidence.

When there is grounds for the complaint, staff need to see us act on the matter so that they have confidence that they can safely raise these types of issues.

It comes back to rules: You can have all the whistle blower protection you want, but if you don't act on the rules, people will lose confidence in them and then what good are they? You don't need whistle blower legislation to address ethical or accountability issues if you have a culture that lets people know they can raise these issues without repercussion and the issue will be dealt with. You have to act consistent with your values.

I believe strongly in this. I started my career as an engineer, focused on technical issues, and didn't give much thought to organizational values.

But I've really grown to appreciate the importance of values to the success of an organization.

A lot of organizations are embracing this right now, and hopefully we will learn from each other.

One of the questions is going to be, how do we measure whether we're actually behaving according to what we say is important in terms of the values in our organization?

Also, is it having the kind of impact we thought it was going to? That's an area we're still exploring.

Is it going to make us a more effective organization and help us achieve success?

Is it going to help us recruit and retain staff as we go forward? Is it going to improve productivity?

It will be important to measure results because if we are not able to demonstrate there has been a positive impact, then I think we will start to back away from it.

And I wouldn't want to see us shift back to the rules-based approach again.