

Charting a Course to Organizational and Individual Success through LifePath™



Left to right: George Keen, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Airdrie; Glenda Reynolds, Potentials Unlimited Inc.; Bert Assen, Human Resources Director, City of Airdrie.

The City of Airdrie is a small city, population approximately 18,000, located 15 minutes north of Calgary. For 10 years it has been the fastest growing city in Alberta, and possibly Canada. This rapid growth has created tremendous stress on the financial resources of the City. Airdrie has recovered from a dire financial situation several years ago to become one of the most progressive and successful municipalities in Alberta. The City of Airdrie is now known for its out-standing customer service, strong relationships with the business community, and its sound financial position.

In 1989, in response to their financial situation Airdrie's City Council implemented two key strategies. First, they focused on correcting the financial position. Second, they addressed employee development. It was through this commitment to employee development that the City of Airdrie created a leading organization.

This case study speaks specifically to the City's efforts in advancing employee development and growth. Of particular interest is the use of leading edge private sector training to continue to enhance their community and simultaneously develop employee potential, especially in the area of career management and development. In this case study we will examine this outstanding investment in their people that earned Airdrie its position of prominence in the public sector.

Past

History . . .

Problems did not only exist in the financial realm.

In 1985, the City of Airdrie was in very poor financial condition. It was at risk of losing its local governing privileges to the provincial government. In effect, the City was bankrupt – ready to be put into receivership. The problems did not only exist in the financial realm. The citizens confidence in the local government was low and this spiraled into adversarial employee-citizen relationships. Customer interactions were very confrontational and city employees frequently avoided citizen contact. Employee confidence was lacking and little support was given to the employees to meet their current challenges. For all concerned, things needed to change. Difficult decisions were made at the local level and new administrative strategies were introduced. The goal was to eliminate the debt, build financial

reserves and to revitalize the community, all without increasing taxes.

The City's goal was realized in 1994 with the elimination of the accumulated deficit and the generation of an annual surplus since that date. Sound fiscal policies, creative, innovative programs and ongoing investment in employee development led to exceptional customer service and employee innovation, serving as the framework that created this success.

In 1991 Airdrie's Council and Senior Administration committed to making training a priority, which was reflected in all budgets as 4% of gross salaries. These allocated dollars were dedicated to various training programs. Employees identified the training topics through committees, focus

groups, and regularly conducted employee opinion/satisfaction surveys. Training programs were then organized and delivered through the Human Resources office.

While most of the training investments were producing excellent results, from 1989-1998, the employee opinion surveys indicated dissatisfaction with the training available for career management and development (a range of 62-88% of employees expressed dissatisfaction in this area over this nine year period). These concerns occurred despite the fact that the City continuously offered and sent staff to training courses. The surveys sent a very strong message to the Human Resources group and they began to look for ways to meet this need.

How can an organization meet the needs of both the individual and organization – when these needs often appear to be diametrically opposed?

Finding the Best Approach

This task proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Several career management training programs were available – everything from self-directed study via computer or workbook to intensive workshops. Employees piloted various programs, yet none successfully met the needs of the employee and the organization.

Many systems and methods reviewed had high administration costs, either through time or system administration. This often included substantial investments in career management software. Fully self-directed programs required too much individual initiative and most people never got around to doing it. Some programs tended to focus only on the individual, and excluded the organization, making the return on the training investment for the organization limited. Another common requirement was substantial investment of time on the part of individual managers in stewarding the process. Airdrie did not have the supervisory or management resources to make this commitment.

Finding Direction

- ▲ **The answer is for organizations to focus on building the self-awareness and self-management skills of their employees. Research shows that high contributions come from employees who have a strong career and life direction and who believe this direction is within their control.**
- ▲ **Employees with this perspective assume the leading role in their task assignments and their individual development. They play to their strengths and uncover win/win opportunities. They require significantly less time from their managers to attain high levels of performance and moral. They stay for the right reasons, and when the fit is no longer there, they will also choose to leave for the right reasons.**
- ▲ **Employees with high self-awareness and self-management skills become a catalyst for organizational success.**



LifePath™ Workshop

LifePath™ is a three-day career management workshop geared to the individual employee. The focus is on a discovery process that results in employees uncovering their 'life path' ultimately creating a high degree of self-awareness, direction, and personal responsibility for career management. It has a very unique approach to uncovering key individual assessment areas, such as skills and interests, understanding personality types, and clarifying personal values. LifePath™ then guides individuals through a process to create a personal "Career Blueprint™". This blueprint then leads to further self-management, skills development and the creation of a plan that optimizes an individual's commitment and contribution to their personal success and to the success of their organization.

Best Scenario

The best scenario included the creation of a career management system that was aligned with other key Human Resource processes. It would offer guidance to the individual employee, and add value to the business, creating win-win actions for the organization and the employee.

Together with Potentials Unlimited Inc., a consulting and training firm based in Calgary, the City modified a unique private sector prototype of a career management process to address organizational and individual needs in a public sector context. The model directly addressed and honored individual needs for career development and organizational needs to meet or exceed annual targets.

Potentials Unlimited Inc., in conjunction with a City of Airdrie pilot group, tested the LifePath™ Workshop as a method of meeting individual needs for career management and as a new approach to meeting organizational goals.

Implementation and Results

Satisfaction ratings improved dramatically.

Results

Approximately 75% of the workforce attended the LifePath™ Workshop voluntarily based on word-of-mouth recommendations from past participants. Employee opinion surveys were conducted prior to and shortly after the LifePath™ investment. Satisfaction ratings for providing training assistance in the area of career development and management improved dramatically, with satisfaction levels at 82% (improving as much as 70 percentage points). The results the workshop produced were compelling enough to conduct a survey to statistically assess both participant satisfaction and organizational results produced.

Benefits

Post-workshop impact was significant, both at an individual, and organization level. These include, and are not limited to –

▲ **Individual job performance improved.** Individuals made changes to their current approach to their work, which increased productivity and simultaneously replenished their confidence in their ability to do good work, creating a virtuous cycle of success.

▲ **Career management responsibility shifted from the organization to individuals.** Employees took the initiative to make changes, invest in their own development, and improve their careers by moving in the direction most productive to themselves and ultimately the organization.

▲ **Work duties were looked at differently and where possible were refined to match individuals expertise and areas of interest.** This was a win for both individuals and their team.

▲ **New appreciation for team members emerged and morale improved.** Individuals were better able to appreciate and value the differences in others.

▲ **Internal recruiting was enhanced as candidates could readily identify the contributions they could make to posted positions.** Individuals had strong understanding of skills, career interests, personality preferences and values that would align well with posted positions. Individuals placed a noted emphasis on moving into a position for the right reasons and not simply because of external pressures or current dissatisfaction.

Both the City and the employees play key roles.

▲ **Some employees decided to leave the City.** The employees departing from the City cited many reasons such as feeling their potential was not being realized, believing they could not meet personal goals within the City, or simply confirming they did not like the work they were doing. In speaking with departed employees, the move has produced personal success for each of them. In many cases this was a “win” for both parties. Interestingly, the departure of even the valuable employees, while temporarily stressful, yielded a return on investment by opening opportunities for other internal candidates whose ‘blueprints’ fit with the City’s needs.

▲ **There was a greater shift towards self-care.** It appeared as people re-balanced their work and home life commitments. Many reduced their own stress by adjusting work assignments to accomplish tasks in ways more conducive to their personal working style or spending more time relaxing with new-found or re-found hobbies. Some simply were able to personally see a new future and made better lifestyle choices (such as more exercise or quitting smoking). They believe this will translate into increased wellness and lower costs for the organization.

Mutual Commitment

As was suggested before, both the organization and the individual play integral roles in this career management process. The role of the organization is to support the individual through renewal of corporate policies, exploring opportunities to help employee ‘blueprints’ come to life, and funding the LifePath™ Workshop. Most typically this also involves creating a supportive work environment, increasing the flexibility around position design, and transferring accountability and control to the people and teams. The individuals’ commitment in this process is to increase their self-awareness, identify their life path, and initiate what they need to realize their own potential.

The following are a few of the examples of the positive impact the LifePath™ Workshop and the City of Airdrie's unique approach to career development and management has produced.

Impact

Positive impact was significant as employees confirm.

Sam's story—

Sam is an IT professional with the City. He was not unhappy with his role or his performance prior to the LifePath™ workshop, and described his career plan as "winging it".

As a result of attending the workshop Sam became clear on his career direction, his likes and dislikes, and his career needs and goals. He concluded he was in the right role, and that he had tremendous potential for growth and development at the City. He signed up for further education (Bachelor of Applied Science – Information Technology), and volunteered for work in his community that enabled him to integrate his skills, interests and core values.

Sam believes that the LifePath™ Workshop has not only enabled him to make a larger contribution to the City of Airdrie, it has also improved his quality of life. He has a better understanding of the unique personalities and gifts of others, and this has led to enhanced relationships with his co-workers. He no longer views his work as being "just a job", rather it's an expression of his interests and how he wants to make a contribution to the world. Work is now something he deeply enjoys.

Phil's story –

Phil is a technical specialist in the field of arboriculture and had been with the City seven years simply 'surviving'. In fact, Phil held the City responsible for most of the difficulties he had with work. Before the LifePath™ Workshop, Phil had been promoted from a technical specialist to one of the key leaders in his area. Life became worse than just 'surviving'.

After taking the LifePath™ Workshop Phil reported having a fundamental attitude shift regarding what was important in his life and how he could move to making the important things realities. He changed his relationship to his work, and with the clarity achieved in the workshop found and pursued the direction he needed. Previous to the workshop he expected the organization to provide him with the answers about what to do with his career.

Phil realized that he had his own requirements for having a satisfying career and it was different than what most people wanted in the traditional sense; for example, being promoted to a managerial role increased his work dissatisfaction. He stepped down from his management duties (which included finding an adjusted reduction in pay that both he and the organization supported) and returned to his former position of technical specialist. He is now recognized as one of the province's leading experts in his technical field and is a highly valued employee of the City. He has much better working relationships with his teammates and appreciates their talents more. As Phil said "The workshop helped me relax into life and things just started to fall into place. I no longer operate from a position of fear, which caused a lot of my unhappiness. I am no longer afraid of leaving or losing my job and this makes me better able to contribute 100% of the time."

Conclusion

Concluding Remarks . . .

Investing in career management can have extremely high payoffs for both the individual and the organization. Step one is to have the learning opportunities and tools – part of a career management system – for employees to build self-awareness and self-management skills.

Organizations can use career management as an opportunity to increase the possibilities of how work can be done and what kind of work can be done. The right program supports continuous learning and can also be used for succession planning and retirement planning. It will require flexibility, follow-up, and creative problem solving to ensure healthy implementation. The best scenario includes leaders taking the same training as employees to improve their own careers and the careers of the people that work for them.

Highly skilled, inspired, self-aware, self-managed people will propel an organization to success despite other obstacles put in their way.

Why not untap this potential in your people?

Tap into your potential.

For further information please contact:

Phil Mittertreiner, President
Potentials Unlimited Inc.
call (403) 830-4442
phil@m-potentials-unlimited.com

Ruth Sheelan
LifeWork Directions Inc.
call (972) 580-9096
ruth@lifeworkdirections.com

Bert Assen, Director of HR
The City of Airdrie
(403) 948-8830
bassen@airdrie.com



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