



Case Study February 2010

Priority Communications Within the City of Vancouver

PROGRAM NAME

Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program

DATE ESTABLISHED

1990

SKILLS DEVELOPED

Fundamental skills
Language skills
Teamwork skills

CONTACT

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OVERVIEW

The City of Vancouver's 8,000-plus workers represent very diverse backgrounds. Several on-the-job incidents occurred in the late 1980s which revealed that many City of Vancouver ("City") workers had difficulty understanding and communicating effectively in English. For example, workplace safety exams were not being passed, some employees could not pass standardized testing necessary for them to gain promotion, and others were being alienated through their inability to communicate in English with co-workers. In addition, English was a second language for 20 per cent of the City's workforce. The City decided to address the need to upgrade employees' literacy, language, and communication skills.

The City of Vancouver's Equal Opportunity Program involved the affiliated Hastings Institute in the development of the Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program (VMWLP). The program was developed alongside several other City initiatives that addressed issues of employment access, promotion, racism, and sexism in the workplace. The suite of programs was created to improve and change workplace conditions for women, visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and people with disabilities. The VMWLP formed part of the City's overall long-term strategy of managing for change, managing for diversity, and valuing diversity by building a welcoming workplace for all City employees.

The program was accessible to all City employees and was not structured by level or ethnic population.

OBJECTIVES

The VMWLP focused on learning and behavioural outcomes that support a primary objective of all City training: individual and organizational development and effectiveness. The program gave employees “the opportunity to achieve individual objectives in a variety of areas, including General Educational Development (GED), airbrake, Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) and other formal training certificates or diplomas.”¹

For the City of Vancouver, the VMWLP's goals were to:

- ◆ create a workforce that is able to communicate effectively;
- ◆ create an inclusive workplace that values and welcomes diversity;
- ◆ provide all employees with an equal chance to develop their potential; and
- ◆ become a leader in supporting diversity and change in the community.²

1 City of Vancouver. Website content. [Cited October 5, 2009.] vancouver.ca/eeo/workplacelanguage.htm.

2 The Conference Board of Canada, *City of Vancouver Mini Case Study* [online]. [Cited October 10, 2009.] www.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC_PUBLIC/CityOfVancouver_cs.sflb.

TARGET GROUPS

The program was accessible to all employees of the City of Vancouver. The VMWLP offered all workers the chance to develop their skills in order to maximize their contribution to making Vancouver an outstanding city of communities. To that end, the program was not structured by level or ethnic population.

ACTIVITIES

Program staff worked with an outside consultant to complete a needs assessment for a workplace literacy program. The results of the assessment showed the high level of difficulty some City workers had in communicating orally with co-workers, and in performing the reading, writing, speaking, and numeracy tasks required for their job. Some of these positions, especially equipment operators and other regulated jobs, required a high standard of literacy and communications for safe performance.

City workers with low-level English literacy skills were isolated and disconnected from their colleagues and supervisors. Their ability to successfully complete on-the-job training was limited, as were their chances for promotion. “Many workers also had unfulfilled personal literacy goals—to read and write for personal pleasure and information, or to encourage and assist their children in school.”³

The program was writing-based and kept participants at the centre of decision making, as much as possible.

Although there was a clear need for a literacy skills upgrading program, the varying needs of the diverse workforce population required a dedicated effort to realize a relevant, useful curriculum. Following the

3 ERIC Digest, “A Learner-Centred Worker Education Program” [online]. [Cited September 30, 2009.] Thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed334872.html.

needs assessment, City staff designed and implemented a new education program that responded to workers' cultural backgrounds and personal needs while also addressing workplace communication issues.

The VMWLP was established in 1990, with the assistance of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Vancouver School Board. The program was writing-based and kept participants at the centre of decision making, as much as possible. Employees set the direction and pace of the program. Each participant's personal experiences formed the basis for their language-training exercises and discussions.⁴

Participants could opt to extend the training an additional 12 weeks.

Participants were able to join the program voluntarily following a needs self-assessment. They controlled the pace of the learning and agreed that a flexible class schedule would work best. Classes consisted of 5 to 15 participants who attended classes for 6 hours a week, for a period of 12 weeks. Half of the class time occurred during work hours, while the other half was taken on personal time. Participants could opt to extend the training an additional 12 weeks, three-quarters of which would be taken on personal time. Any further training was taken on their own time.

RESOURCES

The Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program was made possible through a dynamic partnership between the City, CUPE, and the Vancouver School Board. The City avoided incurring costs for training facilities by holding classes at existing City and union locations. To design and deliver the program, the City employed an external literacy consultant and a part-time staff person, and took advantage of support services

from the local school board. In total, the program was funded by the City to the tune of \$50,000 per year, in addition to any related staff time for attending classes during work, as attendance was subsidized by the participant's department or work area.

INNOVATIONS

Valuing diversity is part of the corporate culture at the City of Vancouver. Managing that diversity is a complex, ongoing process. It involves building leadership commitment at department levels, establishing an environment open to diversity, finding and nurturing partnerships both within the civic workforce and externally in the community, and creating internal staff resources and programs. The Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program, a key element in the City's diversity strategy, developed communities of learners in specific workplace cultures.

The VMWLP addressed literacy issues in a corporate setting by looking beyond language skills to increase worker productivity. Participation in the program allowed workers of varying cultural backgrounds to develop their self-confidence as they improved their ability to communicate with peers, managers, and customers. Their increased confidence resulted in greater willingness to practice their new language skills at work, at home, and in the community.

Supporting a learning environment that accommodated all workforce members required continual adjustments.

Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell felt that the VMWLP developed the person overall, making for a better worker. "If someone's struggling with language or literacy, life is not enjoyable. If we can make it easier, it changes their whole life, and that's going to translate to how they do their jobs."⁵

4 ERIC Digest. "A Learner-Centred Worker Education Program". [online]. [Cited September 30, 2009.] Thememoryhole.org/eric/ed334872.html.

5 Canadian CEO, "A Tale of Two Cities" (Toronto: ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation, 2005), p. 7.

CHALLENGES

The Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program model required above-average cooperation in the workplace. While the program's arrangement showed commitment from employees, the employer, and the union, obtaining mutual union and management cooperation was an ongoing challenge. In addition, supporting a learning environment that accommodated all workforce members required continual adjustments and refinements to the program.

Since the program was not curriculum- or computer-based, it was not always an easy sell to potential program funders. They were more comfortable with traditional training models that have clear, concrete expectations such as pass/fail ratios. Similarly, some managers needed convincing that training without an immediate "bottom line" benefit to their departments was worthwhile. However, their support was crucial in order for employees to be comfortable asking for time away from their jobs to participate in training.

Participants had access to flexible make-up sessions for any missed class time.

SOLUTIONS

The learner-centred focus of the City of Vancouver's workplace language program filtered through all aspects of the design, organization, and operation of the program. The City provided language training on a shared time basis with employees to show equal commitment to communications skills improvement. Keeping enrolment dates flexible and offering training in a variety of locations helped make it more convenient for participants to attend classes. In addition, participants had access to flexible make-up sessions for any missed class time. Classes were purposefully kept small (between 3 and 10 employees) to reduce participants' potential anxiety about returning to the classroom as an adult. This also afforded each participant more personal attention and assistance from the instructor.

OUTCOMES

The VMWLP resulted in employees being:

- ◆ promoted to jobs that previously seemed out of reach;
- ◆ successful at achieving further education goals, such as high school equivalency, post-secondary education, and various technical accreditations; and
- ◆ better able to communicate on the job, as part of their union and in their personal lives.⁶

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The language training program benefited the City of Vancouver by:

- ◆ improving adherence to WHMIS and other safety regulations;
- ◆ increasing productivity and service delivery in some cases (though that was not part of the original mandate)⁷;
- ◆ demonstrating the City's leadership in establishing inclusive work environments; and
- ◆ helping to develop employees' self-confidence and productivity at work, at home, and in the community.

Although difficult to assess quantitatively, the impacts of the VMWLP on participants' personal lives were as follows:

- ◆ Some program participants were able to move into job positions that were previously unavailable to them.
- ◆ Others moved from temporary to full-time employment.
- ◆ Some completed their Grade 12 equivalency or other certifications (e.g., driver's licence, air brake, 4th class engineer).
- ◆ Others went on to post-secondary education.
- ◆ Supervisors reported that workers who completed the program were able to communicate more effectively on the job and were more likely to take on leadership roles.

6 The Conference Board of Canada, *City of Vancouver Mini Case Study* [online]. [Cited October 10, 2009.] www.conferenceboard.ca/Libraries/EDUC_PUBLIC/CityOfVancouver_cs.sflb.

7 Ibid.

- ◆ Program participants were more likely to get involved in union activities by voicing their opinions at union meetings and participating in union committees.
- ◆ Changes were not limited to the workplace. Learners themselves reported that their personal lives had improved through their participation (e.g., reading to their children and managing their personal finances).

USE AS A MODEL

Interest in the VMWLP extended beyond the City of Vancouver. The program has been implemented in other municipalities, including Victoria and Prince George,

in Crown corporations, with workers in other industries (e.g., MacMillan Bloedel, the University of British Columbia) as well as in provincial ministries (Health, Forestry, Education). Under a special “agency program,” the City also offered language training at reduced or no cost to community groups such as the Immigrant Services Society, the Multilingual Orientation Services Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC), and others.

Due to changing organizational needs, the Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Program is not currently operating at the City of Vancouver. However, its past initiative offers a solid model of literacy and basic skills upgrading in a diverse, public sector workplace.

About the Organizational Effectiveness and Learning Case Studies

The Organizational Effectiveness and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses the impact of workplace literacy and essential skills on employee safety and health.

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by *Alison Campbell*

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