



Visual management ties employees to mission, improves performance

By Dan Gephart, **cyber FEDS**® Editorial Director

DIRECTORS' CHAIR: Federal employee morale and engagement are as low as polar vortex temperatures. If agencies are going to meet their missions in 2014, they're going to have to win back their employees.

The [Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey](#) put it best: "With shrinking budgets and limited resources all during a time of uncertainty, agencies are looking for alternative approaches to help them decide where to focus their attention with the overall goal of increasing employee morale."

So with that in mind, I sat down for lunch with former federal HR executive Stewart Liff to discuss the "alternative approach" he took about 15 years ago, one which led to the resurgence of the Veterans Administration's regional office in Los Angeles, sparked a business trend, and earned awards.

An HR artist

When Liff arrived at the LA regional office in the mid-1990s, things looked bleak. Imagine what most people picture as a typical, bureaucratic government office, and you're getting pretty close to imagining life at the old LARO. Performance was dreadful and agency mission was an afterthought. Morale had bottomed out. Everyone thought the office was going to be closed. In fact, two VA secretaries tried to close it.

Liff, a classically trained artist, and his staff applied the concept of visual performance management. They wanted to create an environment of visual stimuli that conveyed missions, and ignited collaboration. Liff describes visual performance management as a "reinforcement program that supports sound management principles by connecting employees to the mission, celebrating their good work, sharing information with them, holding them accountable and positively shaping the outside world's view of the organization -- with the ultimate goal being improved performance."

The bland office turned into a shiny museum, with each floor dedicated to a particular war. "Massive centerpieces" like a tank, a helicopter cockpit, and a Civil War cannon graced the hallways and central areas, while private reflection spaces depicted the veteran experience. Timelines showed the evolution of veterans' benefits. There was even a holographic exhibit to tell the story of Los Angeles' veterans.

Success is visible

All of the visual cues made it clear. The agency was there to serve veterans. Performance and customer service rose dramatically. Customer satisfaction with compensation and pension claims increased 37 percent. The percentage of veterans rehabilitated increased by 600 percent. And the rate of granting benefits increased by 50 percent.

The staff's success was celebrated, too. Throughout the building, individual and group performances were displayed on bulletin boards and television monitors.

But that was at one place, many years ago. Will it work now?

"Absolutely," Liff told me. "All (agencies) need is the will and the skill. Some people will see it as an artsy fartsy program that doesn't contribute to the bottom line. They need to understand that (it's) a program designed to connect people to the mission, celebrate the good work of employees, share information with them, hold them accountable, and shape the outside world's view of the organization -- with the ultimate goal begin to drive overall performance in an integrated and holistic manner."

Tanks and cannons can run pretty expensive, but Liff is adamant that visual management can be done "on a very limited budget."

Can you get buy-in?

"All it takes is a sound understanding of the concept coupled with some imagination and creativity," he told me. "Many of our artifacts were given to us through donations from the employees and the public. I traded some HR advice for the donation of a civil war cannon. If the concept is implemented properly, it will result in improved productivity and accountability, among other things, which will help agencies who are experiencing a budget crunch."

It turned out well for Liff. He wrote a book on the concept of visual management, and has since developed into an expert in the area of performance management -- a topic on which he speaks and consults on quite often.

This isn't something you want to jump into right away, Liff said.

"Will the members support the concept? Will they be in it for the long haul? Will it be a good fit for the culture you are trying to build? Don't waste your time on the concept if the answers to these questions are negative."

But if your goal is to increase employee engagement, improve communication, and raise the work quality and productivity, it's something worth trying. What else are you going to do?

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