

# Alberta Clarion

Society of Local Government Managers

2009 Issue 4

## “Off The Shelf” HR

the idea that "off the shelf" or "paint by numbers" HR packages and software programs will provide you with the required HR expertise and solve your HR issues. Such programs are increasing and many are succumbing to their highly misleading claims.

The growth of these programs is primarily due to the increasingly popular notion that a software program or hard copy "how to" package can be written to solve virtually every management problem. These so-called solutions are easily found on the web and many programs can be purchased and downloaded right there and then. Many fall prey to these programs and packages as they are looking for the illusive "silver bullet" that cures all with minimum effort. Silver bullets, however, don't work and are not a viable alternative to sound people management practices which demand time, knowledge, and personal attention and decision making.

Another major reason for the increasing use of such programs is the insistence of our business schools at all levels to teach that everything can and should be quantified and measured and that such statistical analysis will resolve most issues. This will assist in identifying "business" issues such as quantity of sales, number of manufacturing defects, and amount of raw material wasted. It does not address the underlying "management" issues, however, such as how do we motivate our staff to increase sales, how do we get our staff to produce less defects, and how do we address performance issues such as overall accountability for continuous improvement and quality products. Recent studies of business schools have stated that, "quantitatively based

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## SLGM Awards & Bursaries

Edmonton, Alberta

As the regulatory and governing body of the profession, the Society's purpose is to enhance and promote the professional practice of local government management and to ensure that educational opportunities are provided to improve the management abilities of those who are involved in local government administration in Alberta. Education is an important tool in the development of the profession and its practitioners.

To help members, the SLGM has developed a number of Bursaries. The SLGM Bursary provides registered members with the opportunity to access to two five hundred dollar bursaries or a one thousand dollar bursary for continuing education. Bursary Criteria and application forms may be obtained by contacting the Society's Offices. March 31<sup>st</sup> is the deadline for applications.

The Intern MALW Bursary is available to Interns who are members of the SLGM and are interning in the current year. Bursary Criteria and application forms may be obtained from the Society's Offices. April 30<sup>th</sup> is the deadline for applications.

The SLGM Award of Excellence cosponsored with Brownlee LLP, was developed to publicly recognize those individuals who demonstrate service excellence in local government.

The Award also recognizes the achievements, contributions, and continued pursuit of training of those individuals involved in the administration of local government. The SLGM Award of Excellence recipient will receive \$3,000 along with a keepsake award.

Regular, associate and student members of the Society of Local Government Managers may apply until March 15, 2010 for the Award. This Award is presented at the Awards Banquet on Thursday, May 13, 2010 in Kananaskis during the annual workshop.

### For more information, contact:

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## **“Off the Shelf” HR (continued from cover)**

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analytical techniques received too much attention, while there was little attention given to developing leadership and interpersonal skills."

Another study noted that, "contemporary business education focuses on the functions of business more than the practice of managing".

What is missing is the understanding that organizations consist of people and it is their behavior that drives the organization for better or for worse. Statistical analyses, software programs, and other "paint by the numbers" packages cannot and will not, in themselves, change behavior. It is good management and the right overall organizational culture that determines staff behavior. Tools are not a substitute for face to face management.

Many of the web sites in question make it quite clear that they are offering human resource management information systems (HRMIS) or tools for HR "record keeping and government reporting" or primarily for payroll and benefits. Other websites, however, imply that they are offering more than just tools. One has to read the offer carefully as well as be knowledgeable about HR in the first place in order to truly determine and understand what is being offered.

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### **The idea of using pre-programmed text in the first place, when assessing someone's performance, is fraudulent and meaningless HR management.**

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One such website says that one of their programs, "uses built-in intelligence to help managers write employee performance reviews. It has been designed to help you write complete and effective performance reviews and gives you practical human resources advice to guide you along the way." Further on it says that their program, "writes meaningful text based on your observations." In other words this tool provides pre-programmed text that you can use in a performance review. It is purely a writing aid and not an aid to more effective human resources management. The idea of using pre-programmed text in the first place, when assessing someone's performance, is fraudulent and meaningless HR management.

Other websites offer even more and are more difficult for the untrained to determine exactly what is being offered and of what value it is to their organization. One site offers an Organizational Enhancement Toolkit and says that their enhancement process is comprised of Organizational Design, Human Resource Planning, and Performance Management. Regarding Performance Management they state that "accountability-centered performance management promotes continuous improvements." This requires that you create accountability-centered position descriptions which clearly outline job expectations and

performance standards. You then are supposed to gain accountability by appraising performance against these standards.

This sounds great to the uninitiated, but who does the appraising and when? The Manager still has to actually perform the process. The position descriptions and the actual appraisal form are only tools. The biggest problem that we see as consultants is one of a lack of adequate performance management. Relying on various forms and a process, usually annual, does little if anything to effectively manage performance and to gain accountability. Performance management must be ongoing and personal if it is to be effective. The process is one of personal discussion between the employee and their manager. The forms are not really required. So many managers, however, shy away from the necessity of this personal discussion and rely instead on various written forms. Some, as we have mentioned above, avoid personal involvement even further by using preprogrammed text on the appraisal forms.

The use of such tools sounds appealing, but is really a waste of time and money. Does a Receptionist, for example, need a position description to state that the performance standards for which he or she are accountable include such measures as being courteous, cheerful, and polite with all customers, providing prompt service, and ensuring that all customers are connected to the right department? If they do need this stated in a position description, then you hired the wrong person for the job in the first place. Going further up the organizational ladder, if the CEO or CAO requires a written position description to know what they are accountable for, then they are not qualified to lead or manage the organization.

These websites do say that they offer "certified" consultants to assist you. The problem is that such sites are primarily a retail shop for selling various tools and products and their consultants are usually salesmen who are "certified" purely in the use of the first place. We are currently working with one client who finds that the product that they purchased is far too "over done", is not user friendly, and does not really fit their organizational needs. We recently reviewed a draft Employee Policy Manual that had been developed for the client in question and their particular industry. The Manual is far too cumbersome and written in the format of a collective agreement even though the client is not unionized. At least a third of the manual is redundant and of no use to either the organization or the staff. Much of the material does not represent best practice and some is clearly misleading. Canned HR software programs and off the shelf HR packages is not a viable substitute for old fashioned face to face people management.

*Productive Workplaces* ☐

## Take the Essential Ethical Examination

It's difficult to think of a subject touchier than that of what actions are "right" and what are "wrong", especially when we're discussing a real life situation. Ethics places not only our actions and behaviour under the microscope, but it also scrutinizes our integrity and worth as a person. Since ethics is so personal, it is socially unacceptable to name names when discussing specific situations. Imagine how you would respond if I used an example in this article using your name, or the name of your manager?

Despite this reluctance to speak frankly about ethical issues, one need only read the headlines and newspaper editorials to know there is a great and growing need for more emphasis on ethical behaviour. Nothing can destroy a career faster, especially if you have any amount of fiduciary responsibility, than the exposure of unethical behaviour.

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### *Ethics is so personal*

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The legal system believes sane people have an innate ability to determine "right" from "wrong", so much so that it includes the ability to tell right from wrong as one of the definitions of sanity. In a real sense, for someone to question your ethics is the same as questioning your sanity.

If you're unsure whether or not an action is ethical, there's a simple acid test for you. Ask yourself the question, "Would I have any objection to having my actions detailed on the front page of a national newspaper?" If you can honestly answer "no" then the chances are good that you're acting ethically.

This even works when it is our intent to act unethically. The image of that glaring headline, and the obvious consequences of such visibility, should be enough to force us to reconsider our actions... not because they're wrong, but because of the potential negative consequences.


This acid test speaks to the heart of ethical behaviour; it recognizes that an action is deemed to be ethical or not according to public opinion. (That sentence is a loaded one, and worthy of at least one semester of heated philosophical debate, but for the purposes of this discussion, 'It's good enough'). In some cultures there is nothing wrong with the concept of *Bakeesh* (a 'tip' to a public official): it is merely the accepted way of doing business.

This behaviour is not as acceptable in North America, but *Bakeesh* isn't totally foreign to our culture. When I was working my way through university it was made abundantly clear to me that the inspector was 'entitled' to go to the head of the line when the coffee truck arrived.

They also received large quantities of booze as Christmas gifts, as did every other inspector necessary

The question arises, when does the phrase "rank hath its privileges" become a euphemism for "bribe"? For the answer, go back to that question, would government inspectors be comfortable having the details of all their gifts publicized?

To bring this closer to home, I think we'd all agree that when a manager responsible for dealing with vendors receives preferential treatment or gifts, it might affect their purchasing decisions. Therefore, it might be better if they did not accept gifts or special treatment. When it comes to vendor purchasing relationships, managers, like Caesar's wife, must be above reproach.

That last point is an important one. Not only is it necessary to act ethically, it is also necessary to protect ourselves from any suspicion of impropriety. An accusation of wrongdoing always trumps a denial. This is why the newspaper headline test is important. It guarantees in advance that when our actions do become public, and they will if there's any sort of story worth reporting, then our actions will be judged as ethical. 

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### Proverbs to live by...

A hero is someone who can keep his mouth shut when he is right.

One old friend is better than two new ones.

A wise man hears one word and understands two.

What you don't see with your eyes, don't invent with your mouth.

It's not that I am so smart; it's that I stay with problems longer.

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.

Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.

Once you can accept the universe as matter expanding into nothing that is something, wearing stripes with plaid comes easy.

In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity

Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex...It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction.

Happiness sometimes comes through doors you didn't even know you left open.

## Changes in your Career?

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### Waiver Policy

#### Membership Fee Waiver Policy

In case of ill health, misfortune or such other circumstances as the Board considers appropriate, the Board may extend the time for payment of, or waive in whole or in part and for any period of time the payment of, any fees, dues and levies, and any arrears thereof, otherwise payable or to become payable under these by-laws (*Section 5.4 (a) Society of Local Government Managers By-laws*)

The Society realizes from time to time members may find themselves between jobs with their professional fees unpaid and as that may prove to be a financial hardship to the member, the Board will invoke its power to waive in part for a period of time the member's fees.

Over the number of years the Board has reduced fees members who have found themselves "in transition". In transition means: out of work and actively looking for work in local government management.

The Society of Local Government Managers recognizes two categories of certified membership: *active* and *retired*.

A retired certified member who has left the practice in the local government field and is eligible to be the recipient of the Local Authorities Pension Plan benefit or another pension benefit and elects to be pensionable will pay no dues.

A number of guidelines and procedures have been developed by the Board to assist active members in making application for a reduction of their membership fees while in transition

A member must make application to the Board requesting to be considered for "in transition" status stating they are not employed or working in practice of local government management and are actively looking for work in that field.

If the member becomes employed in the practice of local government management during the year the waiver was granted, the member will pay the balance of outstanding fees for that year.

Active certified members pay full dues with the following waiver provisions:

- Unemployed for six months or more: *one-quarter of full dues*.
- Family leave, interruption (minimum six months) of career due to parental considerations: *one-quarter of full dues for maximum of five years, consecutively of in total*.
- Long-term illness or disability (medically unable to work): *full dues waived upon receipt of a medical certificate*.
- Engaged in full-time study at a post-secondary institution: *one-quarter of full dues*.
- Employment income less than \$20,000 per year, not eligible for any other waiver and not engaged in exclusive local government management practice *one quarter of full dues*.

Members meeting these requirements should contact the Registrar requesting an application form from the Society specifying which waiver provision you wish to apply for. The member must complete and return the waiver application promptly to the Registrar at the Society's Office. Payment of reduced dues, if applicable, must accompany all applications.

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These requests will be presented to the Board for ratification.

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### Make it a habit

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Make it a habit to treat each day as a gift. After all, each day only happens once and lasts only 24 hours.

Make it a habit to treat people with respect. You will be amazed how fast respect is returned with love.

Make it a habit to tell people how you feel about them. If you don't they simply will never know.

Make it a habit to deliver more than you promise. It's okay to risk being counted on.

Make it a habit to serve others. The act of service has no prerequisites.

Make it a habit to follow your conscience. Your inner voice speaks quietly...be prepared to stop talking long enough to listen.

Make it a habit to learn something new every day. Recognize that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

Make it a habit to reflect and renew. The fact that season's change is one of nature's many lessons.

Make it a habit to follow your dreams. If you don't chase your dreams, no one else will do it for you.

Make it a habit to see the best in others. Would you not want others to see the best in you?

Make it a habit to be thankful for your blessings. There are thankful people who have far less than you or I.

Make it a habit to put people before things. "Things" will not miss you when you are gone.

And lastly, make it a habit to make it a great day.

For if you practice this habit long enough...you will make it a great life!!

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### The Last Word .....

#### Congratulations to:

Tim Timmons, CLGM Lacombe County; Janette Ferguson CLGM, City of Grande Prairie and associate member Allan Parkin, Town of Hardisty

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