

Alberta Clarion

Society of Local Government Managers

2010 Issue 1

SLGM Awards & Bursaries

Edmonton, Alberta

The Society of Local Government Managers has developed and participates in a number of bursaries, scholarships and awards to encourage and assist local government practitioners and members with their continuing professional development. The following provides summary information on these awards.

The SLGM Bursary provides 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. October 31st 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.

Regular, associate and student members of the Society of Local Government Managers may apply until March 15th for the Award.

SLGM Intern Bursary provides Interns the opportunity to access \$900 to attend the annual Mountain Refresher Course in Kananaskis. Applications must be received by April 30th

For more information contact Linda Davies, CLGM

R.W. Hay Award cosponsored by the SLGM and the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties

For more information, please contact Kate Hovland at www.aamd.ca

Dedicated CAO and Dedicated Team Awards cosponsored by the SLGM and the Alberta Urban Municipalities

For more information, please contact Lorrie Law at www.auma.ca

Use Your Discretion

One of our clients recently said that he "didn't feel all that comfortable playing God" when he knew that he had a serious performance issue to deal with and that termination was required. He knew what he had to do and he fulfilled that responsibility, but we found his expressed feeling rather telling. So many managers don't like the responsibility of dealing with performance issues or making other decisions that require their own discretion rather than following some set of rules and regulations. Yet this is surely what managers are paid to do! After all, one of the definitions of discretion is "the ability to make responsible decisions".

This is not only a responsibility of managers, but is also what we expect of all employees today. Not so long ago, employees reporting for work at the plant gates were told that they had been hired "from the neck down". Times have dramatically changed and employees today are expected to utilize their discretion in the interests of quality, safety, customer service, risk management, and overall production. Employees have to think, otherwise robots can do the job more efficiently and economically.

Yet so many managers, as well as many employees, are still looking for any means to avoid the use of their own discretion. They still look for that silver bullet that is the supposed panacea for all discretionary issues. We fully understand the reluctance of managers to deal with performance issues, as our society has taught most of us the old doctrine of "ye who are without sin cast the first stone." We are taught not to criticize as none of us are perfect. So we look for quantitative measures for proof of poor performance so that we can say that our decisions are completely objective and defensible and that we are, therefore, not personally responsible and are without blame and are not "playing God". Yet the majority of issues of poor performance are not readily quantifiable and are those, for example, of attitude, poor fit, lack of cooperation, and poor management style. As we have often stated, it is a manager's prime responsibility to exercise their discretion and deal with performance issues. If they don't, then what are they "managing"?

But this reluctance to use our discretion is also found throughout our organizations. Let us look at some of

Continued page 2

Use Your Discretion (continued from cover)

the ways that we try and avoid this responsibility. Many organizations try and write policies that will cover any eventuality. This is impossible. We are not suggesting that some policies are not required, but they should normally entail broad parameters and allow for discretion. The more precise and controlling the policy, the more difficult it can frequently be to make the right decision. One example in the area of human resource management is the use of a policy for bereavement leave. Most such policies state, for example:

An employee shall be granted reasonable leave of absence in the event of a death of a member of the employee's immediate family i.e. spouse, child, parent, brother, sister, mother-in-law, father-in-law, grandparent, grandchild, guardian or fiancé.

Typically such policies also define the allowed number of days off as well as any travel time that may be required. Such policies or clauses in collective agreements are written to preclude the use of discretion which is considered arbitrary and subjective. The problem, however, is that such policies have the reverse result in that they penalize employees with legitimate claims for such leave. No such policy, for example, can be written in such a manner that it lists all legitimate people that could be considered "immediate family". What about the orphan who is raised by his aunt? And what about the employee who loses her best friend? The excuse frequently made for such policies is that they prevent the use of poor judgement on the part of the manager concerned. Well if that's the case then that manager should have his or her performance reviewed so that they can exercise better discretion in the future. Writing more and more restrictive policies is not a viable solution to the exercise of poor judgement.

Someone once phoned us to ask for advice as one of his equipment operators was driving a grader while obviously under the influence of alcohol. We advised him to get the operator off the grader immediately and to provide appropriate discipline and a mandatory referral to their Employee Assistance Program. His response was, "Can I do this? We don't have a disciplinary policy in place."

Many organizations rely on policies, rules, regulations and elaborate processes and procedures to preclude any use of human discretion and to minimize the risk of human error. Policies, however, cannot by themselves prevent risk or the necessity for human discretion. Employees at all levels that are knowledgeable and empowered to use their common sense can do far more for risk management than any number of policies.

The use of Job Descriptions is another way in which many organizations try and control the use of discretion. As far as we are concerned, however, if you really require a Job Description to do your job, then we don't want you working for our company. We expect you to know what your overall responsibilities are and to fulfill them. We will provide orientation and training if required, but we won't provide you with a strict "To Do" list. You see we want you to do whatever is required to get the overall "work" done and that may vary; it may even entail using your discretion to make independent decisions that are not in your Job Description.

Some organizations try and rely on statistics, metrics, standards, and measures to preclude the use of discretion. The emphasis on

such data has become very much in vogue today, in part because it is taught in so many Schools of Business. Obviously measurements of organizational performance are important decision making tools, but not at the expense of a well educated and experienced discretion. But too many organizations are trying to use such data in place of good judgement and discretion as opposed to an aid to good judgement and discretion.

We recall one organization that had been working on an overall strategic plan for over two years and no meaningful decisions were being made while the plan was being developed. Virtually everything was being held in abeyance pending the plan's completion. Every department had been asked to identify goals and objectives and was then being asked to identify standards for all activities. One example of such standards was the height that the grass on the grounds should be cut to whenever mowed – as if the lawn mower operator was going to consult the manual. Either you know how to cut the grass or you ask the supervisor if he hasn't already told you when you're first asked to do the job. And you don't need to consult your Job Description!

Society in general is trying to stifle all use of discretion and judgement through increasingly numerous rules and regulations that try and define all areas of life. This approach does not and cannot ever succeed. One cannot help but laugh at the recent proposal to reduce the time cars spend idling. It quickly became apparent to most people that the proposed regulations were impossible to regulate and enforce in the first place. Every time some skier dies because of an avalanche while heli-skiing or from skiing in the backwoods, some people start insisting that we need more and better regulations. One cannot and should not eliminate all risk. The use of discretion, which inherently entails risk, is necessary for improvements in quality, productivity, customer service, and yes, risk management.

By far the most widely used argument in favor of trying to control all behavior is that employees are not knowledgeable enough or that they are not prepared to accept the responsibility. Those that are not prepared to accept the responsibility will not succeed and are increasingly being weeded out and replaced by those that are willing to. As for those that lack the knowledge, Thomas Jefferson provided the answer most eloquently on September 28, 1820:

"I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."

Productive Workplaces

The Last Word

The Society's website has been updated. You are now able to post your own classifieds. New classifieds will be sent to your email box as soon as they have been approved. Check it out at www.clgm.net

Reminders: Professional Education Affidavit for 2009 are due July 15, 2010.

Published by the Society of Local Govt. Managers of Alberta
P.O. Box 308, Bruderheim, AB T0B 0S0 www.clgm.net