

Stress runs high for city staff

Employees still feel overworked, worry about whether they can do their jobs effectively: new survey

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 16, 2014

Three years after a comprehensive Vancouver city employee engagement survey showed extraordinarily low morale and lack of confidence in leadership, a new survey shows only marginal improvement.

And in the case of at least the Vancouver fire department, attitudes have worsened, to the point that only six per cent of respondents have confidence in fire chief John McKearney and his management team.

The findings, obtained by The Vancouver Sun, come despite a pledge by city manager Penny Ballem in 2010 to try to turn around a negative culture among the city's more than 10,000 employees, many of whom are imbued with cynicism and unhappiness about the city's direction.

And while the survey shows improvement in some areas, in the critical areas of stress and workload they show things have become worse.

The survey, conducted in 2013 by the Hay Group, was a replication of a 2010 survey, the first since the Vision Vancouver administration of Mayor Gregor Robertson took office in 2008.

That earlier survey laid bare a level of mistrust of management among employees, the majority of whom said they were otherwise generally happy and productive but who also questioned changes that were taking place. At that time the majority either didn't think management would act on issues raised in the survey, or didn't know.

Now, as city council heads toward another civic election and Ballem's administration continues reorganizing the government, the latest survey shows employees feel more stressed and overworked, and continue to worry about whether they can carry out their jobs effectively.

A total of 3,288 employees filled out the survey last summer for a response rate of 48 per cent.

In 2010, the response rate was slightly higher, at 50 per cent. Among firefighters, the response rate was much higher, 65 per cent, compared to 36 per cent in 2010.

Ballem on Wednesday said she's happy with the results, which show that specific, targeted efforts to improve relations since 2010 are working. The small improvements in 13 of 16 thematic areas come despite the fact that the Hay Group had warned her when the first survey was done that the second one often is worse.

"What they told us was that if we were going to embark on this, you need to know the next (survey) in a big complex organization like this one gets worse," she said. "We realized if we just boil the ocean for a couple of years we probably won't get any results. So we had a very focused strategy of what we wanted to work on."

She said those areas included clarifying the city's direction and improving leadership skills among the 280 managers and 60 unionized supervisors. In a memo to council in November, Paul Mochrie, the general manager of human resources, pointed out that in eight areas, attitudes had improved between three and seven percentage points. In five other areas, the gain was only a point or two. The biggest

gains were in how employees related to their immediate supervisor.

But those gains, most of which would be statistically insignificant in a public-opinion poll with standard margins of error, pale against an overwhelming negative view employees still have about "confidence in leadership" and whether the city has a "clear and promising direction."

Compared to the public sector norm benchmarked by the Hay Group those two issues alone are ranked more than 20 points lower by employees in both the 2010 and 2013 surveys. In other words, Vancouver, more than any other public sector employer surveyed by Hay, has a deeply entrenched view among employees that they lack confidence in management.

Robertson's office said he was not available Wednesday for comment.

To be sure, the employees' views aren't necessarily a phenomenon of Robertson's administration. Labour relations in Vancouver have been sour for many years, in part because of bitter and lengthy strikes in the 1990s and in 2007.

Sandra Robinson, a Sauder School of Business professor specializing in workplace issues, said it is not surprising that the city is finding it hard to change workers' attitudes. Even among companies that aren't trying to make major organizational changes or have a history of fractured labour relations, changing workers' attitudes can be difficult.

"It takes a long time and it requires a level of intensity and commitment and resources that a lot of organizations struggle to pull up," she said. "To overlay on top of that all of these changes, it can be very difficult. It's a big ship to redirect."

Turning that ship around is proving particularly difficult in the fire department. Firefighters, who have been without a contract for two years and who for several years have been unhappy with McKearney's management style, gave the fire chief a devastating review and are openly calling for his departure.

In 2010, just over one quarter of the officers surveyed said they felt the department had "clear and promising direction." But in the latest survey, that view had dropped to just 16 per cent. Confidence in his management, which in 2010 was just 13 per cent, plummeted to six per cent, fully 55 points below the Hay Group norm for companies.

Gordon Ditchburn, the president of Local 18 of the International Association of Firefighters, said that turnout, and the accompanying negative views, reflect a concern that "the chief doesn't stick up for his men."

The fact the city's firefighters are the lowest paid professional force in B.C. is only part of the story, he said. "What our members are wanting is somebody we can believe in, and who has the ability to provide clear and concise instructions to the men and women of the department. We just think it is time for him to move on."

McKearney is away on holidays and could not be reached for comment. But Ballem strongly defended her fire chief. She said the city views his declining approval rating as frustration from firefighters because they don't have a collective agreement.

"I can tell you we have the best fire chief in the whole country," she said. "We love our fire service. We love our guys ... They are leading in many areas in the country under John McKearney's leadership."

jefflee@vancouversun.com

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