

Case Study

Reducing Turnover by Focusing on Employees' Strengths and Engagement

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PERCENTAGE POINTS

The City of Centennial reduced employee turnover from 42% to less than 1%.

Source: GALLUP



City of Centennial

On Feb. 7, 2001, Centennial was legally established as a city in Colorado. More than 100,000 people live in Centennial, which is located in the southern part of the Denver metro area. Although it is relatively young, Centennial has garnered attention from a number of national publications as being among the best places to live in the United States.

CHALLENGE

THE CITY OF CENTENNIAL MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT is an extremely lean organization. The City of Centennial has approximately 50 employees; it follows a contract model wherein other public and private organizations provide many of Centennial's services, such as law enforcement and public works. To run an effective local government, it is essential that Centennial's staff work as efficiently as possible. But a change in leadership in 2012 preceded a small workforce reduction later that year. That reduction left the City to offload a number of municipal functions to external partners while developing even more efficiencies. By 2014, voluntary turnover had reached 42%, leaving the organization to replace nearly half of its workforce.

APPROACH

AS DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES FOR THE CITY OF CENTENNIAL, Paula Gibson experienced firsthand the impact of high turnover on the already lean organization. Referencing her experiences from previous roles in the private sector, Paula quickly identified a strengths-based approach to organizational development as a potential solution to some of the challenges plaguing the government. After all, from a management perspective, "running lean" meant the City staff must know what it does best and stick to that, outsourcing the rest — certainly a version of a strengths-based approach.

With the support of the new City Manager, Paula completed Gallup's Accelerated Strengths Coaching course and became a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach in 2013. She immediately introduced strengths coaching opportunities to the City of Centennial leadership team by leading executive-level strengths sessions that generated positive energy among the executives.

With leadership support in place, the City of Centennial expanded its use of strengths from the executive team to the entire City staff. All staff members completed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and received a review of their StrengthsFinder report during an "Introduction to Strengths" session led by Paula, the City's resident Certified Strengths Coach. Centennial leaders implemented a strengths-based performance review structure; previously, there was no system for such performance reviews. And the City's leaders and staff adopted communication and feedback strategies that utilized the language and stressed the importance of strengths-based development, using what they learned from Paula to ingrain strengths into their organizational culture.

Overall, the organization's reaction to this strengths-based approach was a positive one. Any employee had the opportunity to engage in a series of one-on-one strengths coaching sessions with Paula (approximately 35% of staff members have done so). Along with City leaders, Paula saw the strengths-based approach gaining traction at all levels of the organization, especially in the adoption of the particular use of strengths language among managers and staff. Qualitatively, she and others sensed less conflict at work, replaced instead with conversations that focused on how individuals could use their talents to overcome or altogether avoid challenging situations.

Still, as 2014 began, staff members were starting to leave the City of Centennial. So leaders introduced employee engagement initiatives to the workplace, beginning with Gallup's Q¹² employee engagement survey. Paula and others identified "engagement champions" among the line staff — people who could help translate the support for engagement initiatives expressed by leadership and management into Q¹² survey participation and commitment to improvement. These champions succeeded; 100% of City of Centennial employees completed the survey, which Paula and her partners administered via Gallup's <http://q12.gallup.com> survey site for small and medium-sized organizations.

Centennial's results from that first Q¹² survey served as both a baseline measure of engagement and a source of initial resistance and frustration for leadership, management and staff. Paula was quick to reassure others that the 4.02 GrandMean score from the overall results — 71st percentile, according to Gallup's database — was just a starting point. The results presented an opportunity to address and improve employee engagement throughout the entire organization.

The City of Centennial committed to administer the Q¹² survey again in 2015. In the year between assessments, Paula and the management team coordinated action planning and strengths coaching sessions that shared one goal: to help Centennial management and staff improve employee engagement by using their strengths at work. Paula's coaching efforts with managers focused on helping them understand how their strengths applied to their specific roles. She introduced a team strengths grid for managers to use with their staff, along with a number of other resources, articles and tools to help teams address and own their engagement at work. She even carved out portions of Centennial's intranet website specifically to house strengths and engagement materials.

Sharing Gallup's guides and resources for developing strengths and improving engagement became an important part of Paula's role as HR Director and helped ingrain the importance of

strengths and engagement into the cultural fabric at the City of Centennial. Managers began to lead through the lens of strengths — embracing how theirs affected the way they managed, and how the strengths of their staff members influenced the way their teams performed. From strengths-based performance reviews to regular action planning, there was now a strategy at Centennial for how to manage and improve employee engagement.

IMPACT

FOLLOWING A REBUILDING YEAR IN 2014, the City of Centennial in 2015 began to see those efforts paying off. The organization again secured full participation in the next Q¹² survey, something Paula attributes to the unwavering focus on improving engagement that everyone from managers to staff displayed in the months leading up to the survey. Engagement results skyrocketed from that baseline GrandMean of 4.02 to 4.50, placing Centennial in the 98th percentile for employee engagement according to Gallup's database.

Meanwhile, the exodus of employees plaguing the organization in previous years all but disappeared. The City of Centennial saw employee turnover shrink from 42% to less than 1%. Paula credits this improvement not only to efforts aimed at engaging employees, but also to the establishment of a strengths-based culture throughout the workplace. Managers throughout the organization support this new culture; they helped create it, so there is buy-in. And the adoption of a strengths-based culture even extends to how the City of Centennial onboards new hires — Paula notes that while the organization can train for certain skills, it is looking instead for people who have the talent and the desire to effectively serve the City of Centennial.

Paula cites a specific department within the City of Centennial as an example. This department's staff had significant turnover in 2014. When the department manager received the team's Q¹² results in 2014, the 2.95 GrandMean left her emotionally distraught. Instead of shying away from responsibility, the manager committed fully to using a strengths-based approach to address and improve engagement with her employees. From numerous coaching sessions with Paula to the multitude of Gallup engagement tools and resources, the manager used everything at her disposal to listen to, understand and support her staff.

Imagine that manager's excitement and relief when her team's 2015 Q¹² survey results showed a 4.64 GrandMean — a better score than the City of Centennial's overall mark. Better yet, no one had left the department; the manager had succeeded in reducing turnover, using a strengths-based approach to overcome a difficult situation and ultimately engage her employees at a much greater level.

Because of successes like this, there will be two strengths coaches in the City of Centennial organization: Paula's boss is completing Gallup's Accelerated Strengths Coaching course and becoming a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach too. Leaders see a clear advantage in having strengths coaches on-site and on staff — people who can professionally explain and implement a strengths-based development approach. Paula, her boss and other leaders also realize that engagement is never "done," and that by supporting their employees with more resources to strengthen and engage their workplace, the City of Centennial will continue to improve in all areas as a strengths-based culture.

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