

The Vancouver airport's not-so-undercover bosses

Michael Chen | December 13, 2016



You're at work at the airport. It's 2 a.m. and you're two-thirds of the way into a 12-hour night shift, chatting with the tradespeople as you walk down the runway. But you're not a tradesperson — you're the airport's vice president of human resources and supply management.

The vice-president in question was Michele Mawhinney when she participated in the Vancouver airport's Night Owl project last summer. Mawhinney, who took part in both day and night shifts, says her participation in the program came out of a desire to better understand the airport's systems, such as baggage and terminal management.

She notes the program, which began in the summer of 2015, was an effort to give the airport's senior management insight into what front-line employees do. All 38 of the airport's executives and directors would go on to participate in the program, with the resulting feedback pushing the company to launch its slightly modified sister version, project Snowy Owl, in April of this year.

How did the program work?

The idea originally spawned out of senior-level meetings and discussions focused on increasing communication with shift-work employees, says Mawhinney.

"It was launched to improve teamwork, break down barriers and increase communication," she says. "It allowed our executive team and our senior management team to access employees that they might not normally see."

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Chris Devauld, a senior communications specialist at the airport, says the directors and executives who took part in the program got to shadow and talk to front-line staff while they worked.

The program has evolved since it began in the summer of 2015. At first, it was open only to executives and directors doing shifts alongside members of the night crew, who mostly consist of operational and maintenance staff, such as baggage and terminal workers, and operations managers. But after managers expressed interest in participating as well, the company

opened up the second iteration, Snowy Owl, to them. And while interested executives initially had to sign up for two consecutive nights, which Mawhinney says was “difficult on people’s schedules,” participants can now choose any single day or night shift to observe.

While participation for operations crew members is optional, the organization encourages employees to sign up. Once employees register, interested executives can choose the timeslots and areas that work for them.

Potential for turbulence

Cissy Pau, principal consultant at Vancouver-based Clear HR Consulting Inc., says that while such programs can be great, they can also be harmful if done poorly.

“They’re good for morale, if it’s perceived that the executives are really interested in what people are doing and wanting to learn,” says Pau. “I think, for the most part, it’s good for the executives and senior managers to get back in touch with the business.”

Pau cautions that executives have to be open to listening and acting on what they’ve heard from the staff, even if it’s difficult, and suggests that the purpose of the program should be clear and the company should know exactly what it plans to do with the information gathered.

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She also points to trust issues that could derail such a program. “If there’s a lack of trust, for instance, in the organization to the senior management team, having all the senior managers now on the shop floor could send the organization into a tailspin,” she says.

“People are going to start wondering, ‘Oh, are they after my job? Are they trying to see who is doing a bad job so they can let us go?’”

Smooth landing

In the case of the Vancouver airport, Devauld says the feedback from the frontline employees has been “very positive” and notes project Snowy Owl is on track to have full participation from all 105 staff at the management level and above.

And in Mawhinney’s case, she saw the benefits of the program in action when an employee was able to advocate on an issue during her time on a shift.

“One of the issues I found was, when I was with a terminal duty officer, we had an incident with a passenger, an elderly passenger,” she says. “We needed to put a privacy screen up, which we did so we could have people deal with the issue. It was at that time and afterwards that the terminal duty officer said, ‘You know, we really need more privacy screens.’ . . . Then, after my shifts were over, I talked to the VP of operations.”

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Mawhinney adds that the program has allowed employees to talk to executives about issues they normally wouldn’t be able to discuss with them. In one case, for example, a tradesperson asked her about the airport’s retirement savings plan.

In addition, she notes the program has given her a greater appreciation for the people who are key to keeping the operations running.

“I walked away and I told the CEO there’s such great resourcefulness and teamwork on the night shift, I think we should all

be thankful [for] what a great team we have running this airport [and], when we're not here, it's in very good hands.”

As for her advice for employers that want to launch such a project themselves, Pau emphasizes the importance of communication. “Be very clear on what your objectives are,” she says.

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“Communicate to employees and let them know this is happening. When you're out there, be open and be willing to listen and ask questions . . . Don't be critical. Don't ask them why they're doing something. Don't criticize the way they're doing something, because maybe you don't know why things are the way they are.”



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