



Morale and motivation in the Canzalian Credential Assessment Unit

“If cloning technology was safe, available, and ethical, I’d fill my teams with workers like Cynthia,” Shane mused as he reread the meticulously researched policy paper the young woman had presented him with – ahead of deadline. Unfortunately, the majority of his team members, especially those most experienced, were much less consistent in the quantity and quality of their work.

He could see one of his team leaders tearing her hair out trying to get an assessor to finish an urgent project on time. Earlier that day he’d lent a sympathetic ear to another team leader who had been embarrassed, once again, by a piece of work turned around at top speed but missing some vital information. Frustratingly, this was from a relatively new recruit, who was clearly falling into the careless work habits of some of his longer-serving colleagues.

For some years, short-staffing and unrealistic deadlines had been cited as reasons for variable performance and low morale in the teams. With recent investment in new technology, a full complement of staff, longer timelines for delivery, and a long-overdue pay rise, there was no excuse. Shane urgently needed to find a way to bring the extreme variations in quality and quantity towards equilibrium.

Shane was the manager of the Canzalian Credential Assessment Unit (CCAU), a cost-recovery agency employing 59 people in teams varying in size from five to 22, some highly specialised and others generalists. CCAU was responsible for ensuring that all overseas-based professionals wanting to entering Canzalia were appropriately qualified for the jobs

This case was edited by Janet Tyson, Australia and New Zealand School of Government from material originally prepared for a Master of Public Management assignment. It has been prepared for class discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective treatment of a managerial situation; although names and other details have been changed it is based on a real situation.

Cases are not necessarily intended as a complete account of the events described. While every reasonable effort has been made to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, subsequent developments may mean that certain details have since changed. This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence, except for logos, trademarks, photographs and other content marked as supplied by third parties. No licence is given in relation to third party material. Version 14-10-2009. Distributed by the Case Program, The Australia and New Zealand School of Government, www.anzsog.edu.au.



they had applied for, and if possible to fast-track applications for urgently needed specialist positions. The CCAU assessed the compatibility of overseas qualifications to those currently offered in Canzalia. Assessors' case loads also included handling local and overseas enquiries about possible vacancies.

The job of an assessor was a mix of knowledge-worker, desk-researcher, data-entry-operator, quality checker, customer service representative – and some would say social worker. Assessors' activities included sorting through applications to check that all requested information was provided; verifying the authenticity of documents and the status of awarding institutions, and if possible benchmarking overseas qualifications against the Canzalian Qualifications Framework. Internal quality assurance mechanisms included having assessors peer-review each others' decisions, training other assessors, and writing new guidelines for assessment.

Many of the assessors had been with the agency since it had been established ten years earlier. Shane had been promoted to CCAU manager 18 months ago after working with the group providing business support to all the assessment teams.

The current workforce was a mix of employees aged over 35, many of them “foundation” staff, and a new “Generation Y” group of “20-something” individuals, usually with at least an undergraduate degree. Shane had observed that the majority of the assessors could be grouped into one of four work styles, roughly split according to age, gender and area of specialisation.

Privately, he labeled one group as “productive but careless”. This group was predominantly male and long-serving, either specialising in vocational or applied science qualifications, or working as generalists. Conversely he thought the predominantly female teaching-qualification-specialists were “conscientious but non-productive.” In the workplace, this group was horrified at the hurried, corner-cutting approaches of the more expedient males, who in turn were frustrated that the “fact-checkers” took their jobs far too seriously.

To Shane's dismay it seemed that the newer elements of the workforce were beginning to fracture along similar, less than desirable, lines of working, in particular the “Generation Y” males. The group he thought of as “fast but unfocussed” was uninspired either by research-orientated work (such as drafting assessment policy) or task-oriented core-qualification assessment work. They would gloss over inconsistencies and problems, rather than make the effort to find a robust solution – especially if the application was taking too long. But because they took short-cuts, or worked hard in spurts of activity to avoid exacerbating their boredom, they could be highly productive.

The last of the four groups, “conscientious and efficient” was characterised by predominantly young well-educated females, like Cynthia, who were highly efficient even when completing sometimes laborious tasks like quality-checking teaching-related applications. They also had an aptitude for research-orientated assessment guideline work.

Despite the quality assurance mechanisms in place, variability within the assessor teams inevitably led to inconsistencies. These raised doubts in the minds of the highly networked professional migrant groups, their immigration agents and other public service organisations,

about the quality of the service CCAU provided. If inconsistency could not be overcome, it could threaten the existence of the unit.

However efforts to even out variable quality and quantity had so far been unsuccessful. The teaching-qualification specialists were notably reluctant to take part in any new or additional activities, including training. As seniors, they dealt with more complicated applications and assessments, being called on by others for advice. But even with such impacts on overall productivity taken into account, some of these assessors consistently failed to come close to meeting minimum output targets. Informal warnings that output needed to increase, given at mid-year performance feed-back meetings, had no effect. Assessors were quick to respond to poor results in their end-of-year performance appraisals, by initiating lengthy, energy- and morale-sapping appeals. Managers therefore tended to record assessors as “meeting expectations” regardless of performance.

Suggestions for performance improvement seemed to “wash over” many of the senior male assessors, Shane reflected. “It is as if they have been conditioned over the years that quantity is all that matters – and it shows. They work as if they just want to get the job-over-and-done-with as soon as possible and preferably without having to think about it.” Even worse, they often seemed to bring emotional and subjective criteria into their decisions.

Investment and improvement in working conditions

Until very recently, many of the CCAU assessors had felt underpaid, overworked and under-resourced, and despite the weak application of performance management, neglected and unrecognised. Working conditions had been less than ideal for most of the life of the unit. Timeframes for the completion of assessment applications were short; volumes of work were consistently high, while lengthy periods of short-staffing put further pressure on morale. It was not until August 2008, long after the need had been established, that a new document database and document management system was implemented. In the race to meet output targets, professional development fell by the wayside, as did the essential work of developing new guidelines. Staff found it dispiriting to deal with angry and frustrated applicants, advised by a standard response form that their assessment would be completed within three weeks, but still waiting for an assessor to be assigned to it several months later.

As the new document management system was being introduced, CCAU was funded to take part in a three-year international project comparing qualifications across a wide range of jurisdictions, ultimately assisting immigration authorities to further streamline applications. Foreseeing the difficulty of working on the special project and implementing new technology simultaneously, Shane had sought an extension of the timeframes under which the unit operated. Despite a number of objections from client agencies, CCAU succeeded in doubling most of the previous timeframes for completing assessments, while at the same time increasing the commitment to clients that every endeavour would be made to complete assessments by the new deadlines.

In mid-2009, the assessor morale was buoyant by historical standards due to the extended timeframes, adequate staffing, the more benevolent allocation of work by the most recently recruited manager and the recent, long awaited, and unexpected pay increase the assessors received following an agency-wide job-sizing process. In theory, conditions should be ideal

for Shane to motivate his staff to make a new start, and iron out some of the glaring inconsistencies in work quantity and quality. In practice, what should he do?