

# **The Municipality of West Elgin Workplace Climate Assessment**

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## 1. Introduction

In 2019, the Municipality of West Elgin's Treasurer assumed additional duties as Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and was appointed responsibility for advising Council and managing municipal program and service delivery with an organization of 23 full-time employees and a small number of part time, seasonal, and contracted services.

Like other rural municipalities across Ontario, narrowly based revenue sources are constrained to meet ever increasing service demands. Being mindful of the fiscal challenges, West Elgin's Council approved the CAO to engage in an organizational review to obtain information about the performance of the municipal organization and the various factors that affect its performance. Such a review was subsequently conducted by the author and a report was presented in January, 2020. That report included a number of recommendations, many of which the municipality has implemented and continues to act upon in an effort to support longer term organizational success.

Almost a year on with implementation of organizational changes that have impacted many areas of its municipal operations, Council directed that a follow up with employees take place to assess the prevailing workplace climate as perceived by employees.

To accomplish this, the author met with the vast majority of employees either individually or as part of a work group during the fourth quarter of 2019 to seek valuable and candid input about how change has impacted them and how they feeling about the present state of the organization. Discussions explored a number of topics including perceptions of current management practices and processes; perceptions of how the changes made to date may have affected individual motivation and performance and that of the organization; the support provided to employees in their role; and the challenges and successes within our workplace. Additionally, employees were provided an opportunity to complete an anonymous survey that gauged the prevailing workplace atmosphere.

The feedback obtained through this process represents the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those discussions and the employees' survey responses. The information presented in this report represents observational themes collected over the course of this assessment.

This assessment of workplace climate is intended to provide Council with point-in-time observations of the workplace according to employees, along with recommendations for continued improvement in a realistic, supportive, and incremental manner.

West Elgin Council should be commended for undertaking this follow up assessment. Such action visibly demonstrates Council's continued support for the workforce, their honest appreciation for employees' efforts, and Council's strong willingness to address ongoing challenges.

## 1.1 Workplace Climate

While the CAO and senior staff work very hard to produce results, they simply cannot address the many challenges to achieve results by themselves. Organizational success demands a team effort. Overall performance is likely to be strong and sustained when senior administrative leaders, managers, and all employees are motivated. When committed to the goals and objectives of the municipality, employees will work hard to carry it out. Intrinsic rewards such as positive working relationships that promote trust, responsibility, and cooperation will motivate employees to address challenges and achieve positive results through effective communication, innovation and reasonable risk-taking.

Employee motivation to perform well is influenced by many factors including workplace climate.

Workplace climate is defined as the prevailing workplace atmosphere as experienced by employees. An assessment of workplace climate is a point-in-time “checkup” of what it feels like to work in a particular workplace.

A positive work climate increases discretionary work effort that employees exert above and beyond job expectations which leads to and sustains employee motivation and high performance.

## 1.2 Assessing Workplace Climate

Research has shown that leadership and management practices that provide dimensions of *clarity, support, and challenge* contribute to a positive work climate. Understanding each of these dimensions will help administrative leaders think about and decide which steps should be taken to improve workplace climate and departmental/organizational performance.

### Clarity

A workplace has clarity when each workgroup knows its roles and responsibilities within larger goals of the municipal organization. Each employee must be able to understand what their role is and how it is aligned with their larger workgroup or department. Employees are aware of the needs of residents. Standards and expectations of solid performance are effectively communicated and well understood.

### Support

There is a positive climate of support where employees feel they have the resources and backing they need to achieve the work group or departmental goals. Physical resources can include equipment or supplies, tools, staff, and budget. Emotional support includes an atmosphere of trust, mutual support, and deserved recognition, in addition to one’s own inner resources or fortitude. Employees must feel their capabilities are being acknowledged, they

participate in decisions of their workgroup, and they sense appreciation for both individual and group success.

### Challenge

A climate of challenge exists when group members have opportunities to stretch, take on new challenges with reasonable risks and create new ways of doing things to be more effective. This is a positive climate that supports employees with an understanding that the “freedom to fail” – the ability to take reasonable risk in an effort to go beyond what is familiar to drive success - is possible. Employees feel comfortable learning from mistakes and able to adopt alternative activities when required. Employees actively take responsibility, develop skills and capabilities to deliver resident-focused services.

### Interaction Among the Dimensions

All three dimensions – Clarity, Support, and Challenge – are critical for fostering effective leadership and management practices that contribute to a positive work climate and ultimately greater organizational performance.

Where one of the dimensions is not sufficient, there is negative impact on employee perception of senior leaders and/or the organization and one’s own level of performance.

For example:

- Employees faced with challenges but lacking support or clarity may experience stress and frustration. They may feel set up to fail.
- Without challenge or support, employees who are clear about their role and required expectations for performance may find their work day without value, restrictive or even punitive.
- Supported employees who are clear about their role and standards of performance but not challenged will not stretch themselves or build their skills likely leading to reduced discretionary effort over time.

To improve workplace climate, it is important to understand how employees perceive their work environment. These perceptions guide how employees respond to different workplace situations. While employees may differ in how they perceive the workplace climate, it is important to recognize that workplace climate is characterized in terms of employees’ perceptions.

Surveying employees’ perceptions offers an important tool for senior leaders to explore perceptions other than their own. It is an important tool for other employees as well so that they may compare their own perceptions with that of their workgroup or department in aggregated form.

In this assessment, an anonymous survey was used for each member of three distinct workgroups:

- 1) Employees that work in the main administrative office of the Municipal Building;
- 2) Employees that make up the Operations and Community Services Department; and
- 3) The management team made up of the CAO and Supervisors and above in all departments

The survey contained a number of statements that focused on specific perceptions of the previously referenced dimensions of *clarity, support, and challenge* that contribute to a positive work climate. Each statement was rated against how employees feel about the workplace today and the level of significance that employees feel would apply within their workgroup or department. The results of the survey show how employees feel about the workplace and where there are gaps between actual performance and importance for each statement, recommendations are developed for improvement actions that appear later in this report.

## 2. Survey Findings

Overall findings from the survey suggest there is a positive workplace climate at West Elgin.

Survey participation was high with more than eighty percent (80%) of the total workforce fully engaged in the assessment.

A number of common themes emerged through the employee survey. These are each discussed in turn below.

### 2.1 Clarity

Employees generally feel there is moderate to strong clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities and understanding of what their role is and how it is aligned with their workgroup or department. That scoring drops however when exploring how such clarity is aligned with Council's strategic priorities on annual basis, for the term of Council, and beyond. Employees have an eagerness to understand how their contributions are aligned with the larger goals of the municipal organization in meeting needs of municipal residents through development and communication of an overall plan that guides their work activities.

### 2.2 Support

Employees generally feel there is strong climate of support where they have the resources and backing they need to achieve the work group or departmental goals. Overall, most employees

feel their capabilities are being acknowledged; they participate to a degree in decisions of their workgroup; and they sense appreciation for both individual and group success.

There are some employee calls for additional delegation of tasks in areas of employee interest and strength as well as in areas they may wish to develop. Employees should be encouraged and allowed to take the lead on specific assignments.

There is also desire to gather and build on ideas and suggestions of others for improvement in more regular formal and informal sessions.

Finally, employees feel they are acknowledged for their contributions and appreciate a sincere thank you in recognition for their contributions.

## 2.3 Challenge

With some exceptions, employees generally feel there is a moderate to strong climate of challenge within West Elgin. Employees willingly take on new challenges and create opportunities where they can to learn skills and broaden their knowledge. Within each workgroup, employees strive to improve their performance. Employees take great pride in their work and have shown great flexibility in adapting to new realities and challenges of service delivery during a pandemic.

## 3. Workgroup Discussion Findings

### 3.1 Administrative Office

Changes implemented in the past year have resulted in employees feeling very positive about the current workplace climate. Employees feel they produce quality work and are very productive.

There is a high level of support and collaboration among office staff. Employees willingly assist others and feel more comfortable to push beyond what is familiar to drive success. This helpful environment has employees learning from mistakes and no longer concerned with experiencing unwarranted criticism similar to that faced in the year prior to the organizational review.

A number of employees expressed a willingness to take on more in an effort to assist with department head-level and above workload. There is a feeling that with increased trust and the transfer of appropriate budget supports, the responsibility and authority for additional tasks could and should be delegated to lower levels within the organization.

While group and department goals are generally understood, there is a desire to understand the overall mission of the organization, the key goals and strategies of Council, and alignment of critical challenges for each department. Employees have a strong need for greater clarity in understanding how the results expected of staff affect the common purpose of the organization.

Communication has improved however staff have noted that increased workload at senior administrative levels has reduced opportunities for additional sharing of information. Employees feel that creative forms of getting employees together for face to face communications should be developed.

## 3.2 Operations and Community Services

Changes implemented in the past year have resulted in most employees feeling very positive about the current workplace climate. Dimensions of Clarity was rated as strong closely followed by the dimension of Support. The dimension of Challenge was rated lower than the other dimensions yet feel they produce quality work and are very productive.

Within the former departments of Parks and Recreation and Water and Utilities, staff have noted much improved and collaboration which has resulted in improved performance and operational efficiencies.

Some Operations employees have expressed dissatisfaction with resources being occasionally moved from Operations to support Community Services, however, there is a high level of support for the departmental management structure currently in place.

Employees are pleased with the increased levels of communication that are taking place and have indicated a desire to see this furthered through increased delegation to supervisory ranks. There is a general feeling that perhaps there is some unwillingness with senior management to let go of what is familiar and to empower others with the responsibility and authority to act would be beneficial within Operations.

## 3.3 Management

For purposes of this assessment, management is defined as those employees at the supervisory level and above. Changes implemented in the past year have resulted in management feeling very positive about the current workplace climate. Employees feel as a team that the organization is producing quality work and are very productive.

As with the other workgroups within West Elgin, there is a great degree of support and collaboration among management. They understand their own and others' roles and



responsibilities, aware of the needs of residents, take pride in their work and feel they readily adapt to new circumstances. Management feels it has the necessary resources to do their job well, understand each other's capabilities, and are recognized for individual contributions.

Management expressed a great degree of clarity pertaining to having a common purpose, being clear about what is expected in their work, and in seeking to understand the needs of residents. Council's approval of administrative support for the Operations and Community Service Department is appreciated by the management team and has allowed supervisors to focus on accomplishing higher level tasks while implementation of a call management system greatly assisted supervisors by fostering greater communication and collaboration between workgroups as they respond to resident queries and concerns.

While group and department goals are generally understood, there is a desire to better understand the overall mission of the organization as well as the key goals and priorities of Council. Such knowledge is necessary for development of aligned objectives that are in support of Council's priorities.

## 4. Recommendations

### 4.1 Strategic Planning

West Elgin put its Strategic Planning initiative on hold as the COVID pandemic emerged.

It is recommended Council consider when to re-start that process for the development of its strategic priorities. To ensure alignment with organizational priorities, goals cascade from the top of the municipal organization resulting in the establishment of objectives at the departmental and then individual level. As Council is aware, setting and communicating its priorities for action, as well as measuring and monitoring progress of same, will ensure management and all employees are working in an aligned manner.

Forward-looking Strategic Planning documents articulate where the organization is going, actions needed to get there, and what success looks like; something that the majority of employees feel would be very helpful to them.

### 4.2 Communications

Employees at all levels of the organization feel that enhanced communication efforts within and among all workgroups and departments would be beneficial.

### **1. Drive Active Participation at Communication Meetings**

Collaboration and communication between departments is critical for an efficient and effective organization. The CAO has introduced meetings between Council meetings for senior staff to help ensure the team remains a cohesive unit and keeps all informed on a timely basis of ongoing and future operational plans, planned Council reports, Council direction and Council meeting outcomes. These short and frequent meetings allow for standing and ad hoc items on each agenda and are intended to help increase senior leader momentum.

Senior leaders must come prepared to share information openly and to work collaboratively with others to drive improvement.

Consideration should be given to expanding those meetings to occasionally include supervisors or hold workgroup meetings whereby employees would feel welcome to share successes of their functional workgroup as well as communicate any challenges.

### **2. Commence Ongoing Skip-Level Meetings with Employees**

Communications between particular departments has improved with creation of Council Highlights distributed by the Clerk's office. While helpful, there is a strong appetite with employees for the CAO to have in-person meetings with employees without other members of management present in an effort to have unfiltered two-way communication.

It is recommended that the CAO commence departmental and cross-functional meetings to better understand the tone and temperature of the workforce and for employees to ask questions of the senior administrative leader.

### **3. Develop and Implement Weekly Highlights Bulletin**

It is recommended that the CAO commence a weekly email to all employees. With input from other senior leaders, the CAO could provide key messages and updates with all employees. This would be a simple yet powerful tool to keep employees informed so they are working on the right priorities, build relationships within and between departments, and highlight individual, group, departmental, and organizational success.

## **4.3 Performance Management**

It is recommended that all current job descriptions be shared with employees who can provide input on necessary updates. As identified in the 2019 organizational review, West Elgin has an inventory of job descriptions that have been completed in the last 3-6 years for each position. However, most employees have not seen their job description and as such, have not provided input or reviewed it for accuracy.

Beyond being a performance management tool and helpful in recruiting and selection, job descriptions help to ensure alignment of duties to the overall organizational mission. Clear and concise job descriptions provide terms of reference for individual success and organizational growth.

Job descriptions should be viewed as living documents. Like other municipal organizations, West Elgin is continually managing change due to ongoing challenges so it is important that job descriptions are reviewed no less than annually by both incumbent and supervisor/manager to ensure workload and expectations are realistic, any major changes in duties are noted, and positional responsibilities are aligned with departmental goals.

Following the development of an updated inventory, it is recommended that a coaching-focused performance management program be created with input from the management group and subsequently rolled out at West Elgin. Goal setting and providing ongoing feedback are incredible and inexpensive tools for providing employees with direction and guidance.

## 5. Conclusion

Developing a more positive work climate is more than a strengthening of teamwork, self-learning, and commitment of employees and work groups and departments. It is a process of leadership. Senior staff should be commended for its leadership in fostering a workplace climate that has vastly improved in little more than one year.

This assessment has determined the workplace climate is very positive. Employees have a high degree of clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities and understanding of what their role is and how it is aligned with their workgroup or department. They share a common purpose and work productively to deliver services to the residents of West Elgin.

Similarly, employees feel a strong climate of support in the organization where they have the resources and backing they need to achieve the work group or departmental goals. Most employees also feel their capabilities are being acknowledged and appreciated for individual and group success.

Most employees also feel a strong level of challenge at West Elgin and they continue to strive to improve their performance, tackling ongoing challenges with pride. Such challenges to service delivery during the COVID pandemic have been met head-on by West Elgin employees adapting to the changing realities.

Having a positive workplace climate is an important driver of performance but there are many internal and external workplace factors that play a powerful role as well. This includes organizational culture, management strategies and organizational structures, and external economic and social conditions, to name a few. While some of these factors are outside the

control of Council and senior administrative leaders, some very important factors can be acted upon.

The recommendations provided in this assessment are examples of such factors that can be supported in a realistic and incremental manner. Development and implementation of a strategic plan, increased levels of internal written and face-to-face communications, revised job descriptions and development and rollout of a coaching-based performance management program are all important leadership tools that will help build a stronger and more aligned organization.