Kitchen wars: Quebec unions overhaul organization to improve work ambiance

Preventing mental health problems is a health and safety at work priority for Quebec’s Confédération des syndicats nationaux (Confederation of National Trade Unions). The Confederation is bringing support to workplace unions through an approach for improving employees’ work environment and well-being. Through it, one set of union members and their employer have found ways of resolving entrenched strife in a residential care home.

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Companies are seldom kitted out for dealing with workplace conflicts. Quebec unions, employers and workers are cooking up a recipe for confidence. Image © ImageGlobe
Just recently, a member of staff slipped unnoticed out of the kitchen at the Maskinongé residential care home halfway between Quebec and Montreal. Unobserved, she smeared some of her colleagues’ car door handles with sticky peanut butter. Payback time for the shaving cream cake served up a few days earlier by some of the cooks! That’s the kind of playground prank that the kitchen staff now enjoys, but would have been unthinkably just a year ago in a workplace riven by interpersonal strife and a “hell’s kitchen” atmosphere.

So sourd had the mood grown of late as to prompt a stream of departures from staff who felt they could no longer carry on in a food service where working against rather than with colleagues was practically the norm. The thirty-odd kitchen staff were constantly at loggerheads over petty niggles like dishes lying around on worktops, or late-running preparation. Workplace accidents also increased, especially around the dishwashing station where lifting and scrubbing heavy pots and pans were gruelling jobs that always fell to the same people. The word on the care home grapevine was that the kitchen was an unwelcoming environment, and the list of prospective replacements melted away like snow in the sun.

Fed up with the constant faction wars, Diane Rivard also quit the care home kitchen after twelve years for a sideways move to a different department. Some time after, she became aware that the constant conflict was making her former colleagues ill and could even degenerate into bullying. So, the union health and safety rep sought advice from her confederation in the form of CSN labour relations department’s health, safety, and environment unit. What Diane Rivard wanted was outside help for the parties concerned to find ways of addressing the unhealthy climate. "Six staff had left in two years, and the employers’ interventions were getting nowhere. We had to try something else", says the rep whose heart is in the kitchen.

A suggestion box

Réal Roussy, head of the care home’s food, hygiene, sanitation and laundry department, signed up early to the union initiative simply because he had run out of other ideas. Appointed in 2007, this seasoned manager had never seen a kitchen in such disarray. All his urging of the need for teamwork, the importance of respect between colleagues, and attempts to soothe ruffled feathers through one-to-one meetings were to no avail and the climate went steadily downhill. "We could have got an industrial psychologist in to do an analysis, but working with the union was much cheaper", says the fifty-something. It also enabled a more participatory approach.

Before agreeing to try a work environment approach, CSN expert Natacha Laprise made sure of the employer’s real willingness to engage a process of stemming the problems identified at the source. There was no point in just uncovering the work organization issues unless everyone was willing to cooperate in finding and adopting new ways of working. With this prerequisite accepted, the adviser suggested setting up a joint steering committee of union members and the employer to define the structure of the intervention, and discuss the anticipated difficulties and challenges of the process. Its main recommendation was to set up a working group on the work climate, specifying the size of its membership and the frequency of meetings.

Before the group was set up, Natacha Laprise met all the kitchen staff in autumn 2010. One by one they first told her what they thought was wrong and how they thought it could be put right. “Some didn’t think it would work because it had been riven by conflicts for so long”, recalls the adviser. “I explained that we would be looking at the whole work organization, and especially making sure that the measures taken were applied throughout the process”. From the interviews, a diagnostic report was written and submitted to the whole staff, then validated. A kitchen suggestion box was also introduced for staff to suggest changes to meal and tray preparation or for rearranging work areas to improve the work atmosphere.

“At our first meetings, you would find at least thirty slips of paper when the box was opened”, recounts Joey Mackinnon, an assistant cook and working group member. “We started off settling little things, like the placing of equipment, time spent on particular stages of production, including leaving a daily prep sheet to the night shift”. A daily prep sheet in their terms means portioning the food to be distributed to residents. This entails placing purees, yoghurts and fruit juices on the service trays twice a day. Analyzing the organization of the kitchen, the working group realized that this repetitive task could be better balanced. The employer helped by extending the kitchen to free up more space in the room to improve circulation and reorganizing work around the dishwashing sequence. And most importantly, an additional big sink was fitted to ease the job of soaking heavy pans.

Through the meetings and discussions, the working group also came to realize the strategic importance of washing the cooking vats. “This was something singled out by several people in my one-to-one with staff members”, says the CSN adviser. An ergonomist’s recommendations also helped to improve equipment use. Handy workarounds were also adopted. "Cooks now cover the bottom of baking dishes with plastic wrap to prevent mincemeat sticking to them, for instance", says Diane Rivard. And most importantly, the employees took on board that everyone was responsible for cleaning pots and pans, not just one or two people. The daily work roster now requires everyone taking a turn at the sink so that some employees do not spend hour after hour scouring, which caused work accidents.

Getting to this middle ground meant the working group members having to completely rethink work plans, i.e., the list of daily tasks each employee had to do. "Up to then, work plans were fairly vague, so some thought they did much more work than others. Once they had done their jobs, they didn’t give their colleagues a hand", says Diane Rivard. Now, everyone’s work plan expressly states that they have to lend a hand to other team members when they have finished their own list of jobs.

It’s good to talk

Training provided by union adviser Natasha Laprise also helped staff overcome the difficulties of talking to one another. “We had to draw a picture of a sailboat as described by a person who was looking at a model of one”.

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recalls assistant cook Joey Mackinnon. "It was pretty hard. It made me realize how precise you have to be when asking someone to do this or that". The day-long communication course also taught the union members the value of different ways of talking to people. Asking someone to do something rather than telling them to, or showing respect to the other person often gets things done better. This is basic advice, but can make all the difference when tempers flare in the kitchen.

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The head of food services drew a series of conclusions from this rethink. He first took care to pass on the topics discussed in the working group after each meeting so that all affected employees knew what had been discussed, as a way of allaying the general distrust. Based on the various interventions, Réal Roussy also changed his interpersonal conflict management. "Now, when two workers are at odds, I call them both in and listen to what they have to say", explains the manager. "Then I ask them to work together in a respectful manner to work it out together".

He believes the new tack embarked on two years ago is starting to pay off. In the past several months, the mood in the kitchen has changed. People are smiling more, and more helpful to one another. One sign that the message is spreading among other care home services is that replacements who once shunned the kitchen service are again applying to fill in on meal preparation duties. "The mood has lightened", confirms in-charge meal service staffer Guylaine Dupuis. "People play more pranks on one another; there's a lot more laughing and joking than before. Anyone who starts complaining about something gets advised to talk to the working group about it or drop a note in the suggestion box".

The union-initiated approach to get the employer and thirty-odd staff involved has not ironed out all the problems, however. Some employees will never get on, and the often gruelling kitchen working conditions can add to the general grouchiness. "When it's over 30 degrees in summer in the kitchen, with very high humidity, it can be tough", says Guylaine Dupuis. "As the room can't be air-conditioned, the employer is looking into a ventilation system that would extract moisture via the roof". Gradually, the process has established the conditions for productive collaboration with the employer which gives staff the confidence that problems will be put right, even if not straight away. For his part, manager Réal Roussy knows he has to support his staff more closely, especially when kitchen workers have to adopt new ways of working. That will be happening soon, as meal times will change slightly to better fit the elderly residents' needs.

1. The kitchen supplies 150 breakfasts, 350 lunches and 300 dinners daily.

An experiment that could have spin-offs

The different actions carried out jointly by the union and the Maskinongé care home owner could easily be exported to another workplace. This kind of collaboration is not common, because work organization is the employer's responsibility in Quebec. In other words, the employer's management right falls outside collective agreements unlike practice elsewhere such as in the Scandinavian countries*.

Even so, Michel Vézina, a consultant in occupational medicine at the Quebec National Institute of Public Health, argues that employers would do well to take a cue from the experiment run in the past two years in the care home kitchen. "I see it as a real breakthrough", he says, "because there is abundant research to show that people who lack freedom to make decisions over their workload often suffer health problems. The risk of cardiovascular disease, backache and mental health problems increases".

That is why the researcher is working with union adviser Natasha Laprise to promote the participatory method developed for the care home to other organizations and firms. Michel Vézina sees the experiment as a very worthwhile answer to the resistance to change that employers claim to meet when trying to change work organization. "It shows that demonstrating transparency in action and getting the work community involved yields much better results than sticking to individual approaches", says the expert.

For her part, Natasha Laprise is hoping to be able to put this highly successfully intervention to practical use again. It was very clear to her from the outset that the approach could deliver a positive message – that you can take action to improve the working environment and employee well-being. Realistically, however, she knows that prevention messages can be difficult to get across. "We get more calls to put out fires than to stop them starting", she says.

* "Management right" in Quebec defines what employers can or cannot do to manage their employees. It cannot be exercised in order to harm employees and must comply with prevailing laws and standards. The more common concept in Europe is the "right of control".