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City of Alexandria

Feedback and Themes from Employee Focus Groups

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Watson Wyatt Worldwide

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Process Overview

- From April 19 - 21, 2008, Watson Wyatt conducted 7 employee focus groups to gather employee perceptions and ideas regarding the current performance management system, pay program, and benefits
- The seven focus groups were structured based on job level and/or department. A total of 72 employees participated; the groups were structured as follows:
  - Management
    - Department Heads, 7 attendees
    - Middle Management, 12 attendees
  - Non-Management
    - Paraprofessionals, 12 attendees
    - Wage-grade employees, 5 attendees
  - Public Safety:
    - Police Department, 11 attendees
    - Sheriff's Department, 12 attendees
    - Fire Department, 13 attendees

Summary of Themes Across All Focus Groups

Performance Management

- Current system is too subjective and prone to rater-bias and favoritism
- Tools/forms are poorly constructed and don't allow the manager to get to the root of the employee's deficiencies or strengths
- Effectiveness of process is contingent upon the manager; but managers don't have proper tools/training
- Mangers are not held accountable for doing a good job in carrying out the performance management process

Compensation

- Merit pay alone is not keeping pace with inflation; should have a combination of merit and COLA
- Employee expectations for merit pay are never met because there is no differentiation
- Cap on promotions is too low; outside candidates receive a higher salary
- Net pay has effectively been reduced by recent health contribution cost increases
- No linkage between performance and pay
- Other cash awards are seldom used, used inconsistently or are too minimal to be effective

Benefits

- Leave policies are outdated and accrual rates appear low to the market
- Employee benefits are well-regarded in general, though many employees expressed dissatisfaction with the number of/quality of their healthcare choices
- Retiree medical coverage is deficient and too pricey
- Too expensive to live in the City; the housing benefit doesn't help and there is insufficient help for commuters
- Retirement/pension plan is excellent

Job Classification/ Other

- Easier to go around the system than to work within it
- Classification system is too rigid/bureaucratic and not reflective of current work environment
- Hard to advance/few opportunities to grow within role; re-classifications are difficult to implement and employee must wait for an opening to advance
- The City does not care about or value its employees

Themes - Public Safety Focus Groups

Performance Management

- Tools/forms are not applicable to the public safety departments
- No repercussions to ratings; everyone eventually gets a raise
- Working supervisors have too little time to effectively administer the current process

Compensation

- Prior system changes were only “band-aids” for bigger problems and sometimes created more problems
- Pay leap-frogging and compression is rampant and a concern
- It doesn’t “pay” to stay; tenured employees are paid less than new employees
- Takes too long to reach the top of the pay scale
- Shift differential and on-call/standby policies should be added/refined
- Believe that there should be rewards for competencies/skills gained

Benefits

- Sick leave policies are outdated and inappropriate for public safety departments; should be a better way to compensate employees for unused sick leave
- Retiree timeframe (“drop”) is too long compared to other jurisdictions

Job Classification/ Other

- Expressed distrust in classification system and benchmarking process
- Inequity/lack of parity in compensation and benefits across the public safety departments
- No incentive for public safety employees to take an administrative assignment

Themes – Management Focus Groups

Performance Management

- New business planning process (MFRIs) could be a good way to frame a new performance evaluation process but could be difficult to cascade down to the lowest levels
- Need to encourage more employee development and education
- Rewards and reclassifications should be performance-based, not tenure-based as is the case with some departments

Compensation

- Difficult to attract talent with current pay ranges/classifications; find that candidates take a cut in pay to work for the city
- As duties have been consolidated/added, no reward has been given
- Cash awards are too minimal to be effective; use varies across departments
- Need to add more discretionary bonus and incentive opportunities
- Willing to sacrifice some pay for a robust benefits package, but now feel that benefits are eroding and that trade-off is no longer valid

Benefits

- Younger employees do not value the benefits package because the choices do not reflect their stage in life
- Would appreciate a City match to the 457 plan

Job Classification/ Other

- Policies and practices are either not communicated or inconsistently delivered/applied; every department does things differently
- Employees are working past their capacity and burning out or giving up
- Staff feel that they are not a appreciated or a priority

Themes – Non-Management Focus Groups

Performance Management

- Not enough mid year feedback or managing of goal/priority changes
- Not enough recognition – monetary or non-monetary
- Feel disconnected with higher level management; successes don't get shared down to the employee population
- Performance expectations are not targeted to an employee's growth or development

Compensation

- Pay is not connected to performance
- There is no incentive to be a high-performer because everyone gets a raise
- As duties have been consolidated/added, no reward has been given
- Employees from the outside get better pay than tenured employees
- Pay scale is outdated and doesn't reflect the market

Benefits

- The City does not recognize that a small change in their pay check (e.g., like benefits cost increases) can make a significant difference to their lower level employees and their standard of living
- United Health Care is a terrible vendor
- Would like to take advantage of Telecommuting or Alternative Work Schedules to deal with the commuting issues

Job Classification/ Other

- There should be automatic reclassifications as skills are gained
- City doesn't care about whether they stay or not and are not valued
- Mystery around how to be considered for an opening or promotion – internal candidates are not always encouraged to apply or hiring managers already have a candidate in mind before they post

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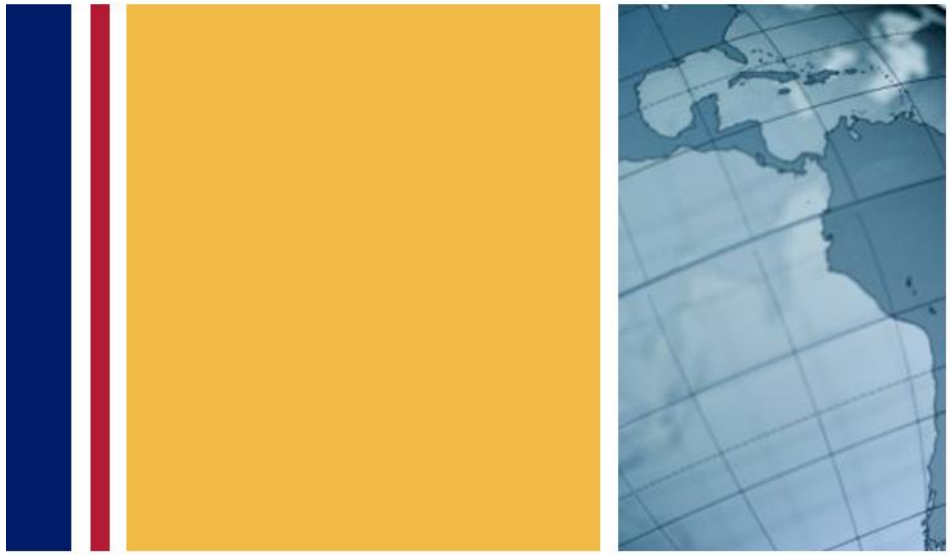

Appendix

Unique Observations within Each Focus Group

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Police Department Focus Group

- Believe that the City should look at comparator range maximums and actual pay, not range midpoints
- Should have on-call pay policy and accountability for those who do not come in when called
- Higher performers move into the supervisory ranks to get higher pay; need a way to retain high performers within the officer ranks
- Many ancillary jobs across the police department but no additional compensation for it (e.g., incident manager, crash team, etc.)
- No benefit to moving to the detective classification; positions have increased responsibility but no reward
- COLA should follow the Federal Government
- Job classification is not applicable to the PD; a ranking system is more traditional/accepted practice
- Difficult to compare retirement plans across the city; PD pays additional 8% for their plan
- Would like to see accrued sick leave contributed to the retirement plan
- Would like to see a clothing allowance
- A “take-home” policy should be implemented
- Would like to be compensated for benefits/perks that they can’t take advantage of like telecommuting
- Additional education/training outside of the “P” program to encourage skill building

Sheriff's Department Focus Group

- Performance Management System is too time consuming and there is an inherent difficulty in maintaining objectivity in a political organization
- There is a deliberate attempt to "low-ball" pay and benefits by using hand-picked comparators and selecting inappropriate benchmarks
- Overall, the appraisals do reflect actual job performance accurately
- Sheriff's Department policies and practices should be comparable to the Police Department; Police Department gets more money and better treatment overall than the other public safety departments
- Departments should be an active participant in benchmarking and comparator review
- Within the Sheriff's Department, advancement is limited
- Dental insurance could be enhanced; belief that offering is below market
- Uniform services would be welcome
- Shift differential pay could be improved as could holiday pay
- Poor performers still always seem to get a raise and are never truly penalized
- Concern that a new performance management system will cause even more turmoil and will take away time from Department objectives
- Within the Sheriff's Department, an employee is either doing their job or not – it is difficult to parse out degrees of performance

Fire Department Focus Group

- The current process of “checking the boxes” in the performance assessment never gets to the true performance of the employee; a supervisor must create their own addendum to ensure that the actual deficiencies or strengths of the employee get captured
- Supervisors have a short-term memory – they only rate on what they remember from the last month or two rather than doing a comprehensive review of the entire year; discussions are not occurring throughout the year as expected
- EMS division works within a matrixed environment; their year-end rater may only see them intermittently throughout the year. If their working supervisor, i.e., Station Chief, could have input into their rating, the result would be more credible to the employee
- Have been told that they don’t have to use the performance management form at all any more and that it is only for performance problems
- Would like to see the steps used to acknowledge competencies/skills gained
- Consider adding premiums to the final average salary calculation for retirement
- Should not treat all public safety disciplines the same; in-demand jobs must keep pace with market
- Inconsistency across departments in regards to shift differentials, double time and holiday pay
- City of Alexandria averages a 56 hour work week which effectively reduces their hourly wage in comparison to other jurisdictions that work a 42 or 48 hour work week
- Fire Department is unique in that it has 4 distinct units – Suppression, EMS, Communications and Fire Marshals; some worry that new policies/practices will be focused on Suppression and not applicable or tailored to the specific unit
- Skepticism that the City is doing the actual pay review rather than a third party like Watson Wyatt

Department Heads Focus Group

- Step increases should reflect the COLA each year and the merit should be separate and re-earned each year
- Want more input and control over the decision-making; would like to partner with HR, not be policed by it; would like more authority to cut the “dead wood” or give discretionary pay
- Current system encourages managers to keep positions filled so that they don’t lose the associated budget even if they no longer need the position or the employee is a poor performer
- Recent hiring efforts have proven that the ranges are not aligned with market; most are hiring in employees at the top of the range or are getting turned down. However, classification may be the problem rather than the ranges; descriptions used to classify jobs are completely out of date and irrelevant
- At one time, they could attract candidates by talking up the benefits; as the benefits erode, this is no longer a selling point
- Believe the recruiting process is flawed because they are screening candidates on outdated descriptions.
- Too many factors in play at one time – higher benefits contribution, no raises, higher gas prices, etc. – have eroded employee morale
- Employees do not feel that they are appreciated
- Would like to see more progressive benefits outside of the traditional; suggestion for “green” benefits, e.g., bike to work benefit
- Competition for tuition assistance is troubling – program is good, but few people are ever selected
- Would like to see a charity match
- Time and attendance system is cumbersome and inaccurate
- Would like to see more bonus and incentive packages including some that are discretionary within a department

Middle Management Focus Group

- Need a better way to develop marginal performers
- City Stars program is not effective and inconsistently managed
- Supervisor evaluation form is too long
- People will leave their chosen profession just to get a promotion and more pay
- Institutional knowledge is not valued
- Directed actions skew the job classifications and pay
- Would like to see language differentials for appropriate positions
- COLA process retains poor performers and disincents high performers
- Hard to move up without an opening available; disincentive for employees to grow within a position; no career ladders
- Titling inconsistencies
- Like the “Well Well Well” campaign
- Appreciate telecommuting, but needs refinement
- No parking is an issue
- Would like to see some child care benefits like back-up daycare or on-site daycare
- Would like to see an in house wellness center
- Would like an increase to the tuition reimbursement program
- HR should offer more education on the benefits package and perks of working for the City

Paraprofessional Focus Group

- No accountability for supervisors to do a good job on performance appraisals
- Reward employees for supporting the mission
- Civilians have no career ladder; no professional growth and development
- Personnel requirements are cumbersome and have interviews even though they know who will get the job
- Tool only used as disciplinary action, not to reinforce good performance
- There should be some mechanism for automatic reclasses to the next level for those who achieve competencies in their current level
- Additional duties do not always result in a reclassification
- Process for reclass is a mystery – no one knows the right words to use, the right things to highlight etc.
- Factors and job descriptions are old and may not reflect the work currently being done
- Lack of communications about policies
- Reclassifications take too long; department managers should have some say
- United Health care is a bad vendor and Kaiser isn't much better
- Would like to see an opt-out benefit for those who don't select benefits coverage
- Would like to see a cafeteria plan or benefits credits
- Would like to see AWS and telecommuting be offered
- Want COLA to be mandatory
- Public safety departments have better retirement plans

Wage-Grade Focus Group

- Goals set in the beginning of the year often change and management forgets to recognize this at year-end
- Hard to find the right goals for some employees
- Star performers scale back their performance because they know it doesn't matter
- Nothing stays confidential within this employee group
- Team bonuses would not work at this level – one person ends up doing all the work and the everyone benefits
- City Hall does not value employees
- Personnel operates behind closed doors and never asks for input
- Would like health costs to have a guaranteed number of years at a steady state before going up again
- Would like to be able to donate sick leave instead of vacation to the catastrophic leave bank
- Would like to see a broader definition of bereavement leave
- Jobs are created but never advertised for internal competition and many times internal candidates aren't considered
- HR and hiring managers need to realize that some employees don't have access to computers at home or do not have e-mail in order to take advantage of job postings
- Too much value on education versus experience in the job classification/hiring process