

FEMA Navigates the Perils of HR Transformation

Imagine starting each year knowing that basically every major variable in workforce planning is entirely random. Volume of work? Random. Timing of work? Random. Place of work? Random.

That's essentially the challenge Tim Cannon, the relatively new head of Human Capital for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), faces every day when he shows up for work. Every year, Tim and his team at FEMA start with a completely blank slate. The number, timing, and place of the disasters they will have to respond to are random. No one can really predict how many, when, or where they will occur. At the same time, the nature of the mission – and the public's perception of that mission – has changed dramatically in the past few years. Since joining the agency just a few months ago, Tim has come to deal with not only the fundamental challenges of HR, but also the profound challenge of HR in an agency with FEMA's unique mission, and of course the political reality that FEMA faces today.



Tim Cannon
FEMA

Facing Storms & Disasters: Real & Political

Contrary to the popular imagination, FEMA is not and has never been, a “first responder.” That elite designation is reserved for the men and women that show up first on the scene of a disaster, including the local fire, police, and other emergency services. FEMA, in fact, has to be invited on the scene by the local authorities, namely the governor of the state in which the disaster occurred.

At the same time, the scale and scope of large modern disasters – from 9/11 to Katrina – quickly exhaust the resources of most local authorities and FEMA is expected to respond. “Our goal is to be right there at the elbow of the local authority, so when they need to invite us in, they turn around and there we are,” Tim said. “Even though we’re not a first responder, we want the ability to respond as soon as the actual first responders need us.”

To achieve that ambitious goal, the agency is charged with hitting an exponential growth objective that would nearly double its full time permanent workforce and grow its large reserve workforce. Of course, it's not just a numbers game. Tim and his team also need to make sure they get the right people with the right skills. This poses a particularly tough challenge in the reserve workforce, which is made up of



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Connections Newsletter

December 2007

people with other full time jobs. Tim is charged with getting a better handle on the reserve workforce and professionalizing it to meet new standards.

According to Tim, "In meeting the new mission requirements, our challenge has been that HR has languished. We haven't been looking strategically. Instead we've been working transactionally, not anticipating the future." Prior to Hurricane Katrina, "FEMA had been a relatively small agency that ran rather lean, with limited standing infrastructure. While this was appropriate for the time, we needed to get more agile and prepare to respond to our new environment. That requires ramping up in our regions and the regions will need to have close relations with the local first responders so we can be right there in step with them when the time comes."

Of course, while facing all these challenges, Tim also came into a very politically charged environment. FEMA has committed a number of mistakes, by its own admission, and continues to live with the ramifications of its role in recent events. The mission, however, continues. Despite the political storms, the real storms keep coming, and Tim and his team have to make sure FEMA is prepared with the right workforce to do the job.

The First 90 Days in Office

When we sat down with Tim, he had been in the chair for just over 90 days. When he arrived, he received no "in-brief", the standard on-boarding presentation most executives receive their first day. Instead, he just had to go to work. Trepidation immediately came over him. "On the first day, I was concerned I'd made a mistake. I still didn't know where everything was, who was responsible for what... I didn't even have email access, but I had to dive in and go to work," said Tim.

Tim spent the first 30 days just finding out the critical parts of his division. He quickly became concerned about the level of inconsistency he found and the lack of communication. "My anxiety level started to decrease, though, as my understanding of the 'measures of goodness' increased." He spent a lot of time assessing what belonged where, looking for patterns and started to think through what would need to be done. To help get things back on track, Tim turned to Touchstone Consulting Group, a leading strategic advisory firm specializing in helping government executives facing similar challenges.

"We brought Touchstone in to facilitate an offsite. While we were there, I learned that this was the first time the leadership team had been in the same room for longer than 30 minutes," observed Tim. "At the offsite we kept peeling back the on-



HELPING HR TRANSFORM

Connections Newsletter

December 2007

ion and found lots of confusion over roles and responsibilities. We came out of that meeting with a baseline understanding that we could do better. It may not sound like much on the surface, but it meant a fundamental acknowledgement that we could do more for the agency.”

With that acknowledgement in hand, Tim and his leadership acknowledged the need for change. “We didn’t want to just start moving boxes around on an org chart, though,” said Tim, “Instead Touchstone helped us define a vision to become the best HR shop in government.”

Getting Down to Specifics

The FEMA Human Capital Leadership Team, working with Touchstone, chose to focus on fast, timely, and accurate customer service balanced with their stewardship role of compliance and acting as the honest broker for the agency. In Tim’s words, “We got engagement around building the case for change. FEMA is the tip of the spear in responding to national crises and we in HR have a role to play in ensuring the agency is always prepared to respond. We’ve been legislated to do it, we’ve been directed to do it, and besides, it’s just the right thing to do.”

The team outlined four specific initiatives:

Customer Service Center. Today, FEMA is spread out across four different buildings scattered around the DC area. Employees didn’t know where to go for HR services, so creating a physical center will give them a place they can always turn to. “The Center will be the face of the Human Capital Division and will take walk-ins for everything from job applications to transaction processing,” noted Tim.

Web-Portal for Online Employee Self Service. The Portal will provide 24/7 service for employees and a manager’s toolbox for frontline supervisors. This along with the good financial portal FEMA has access to through the National Finance Center, will provide the critical tools and other information that employees need and ease transaction processing for the Human Capital Division.

Better Hiring Processes. To meet its end-strength goals FEMA will have to do a lot of hiring and the existing process could really hamstring the agency’s efforts. Therefore, the Human Capital Division will implement an online application process. That’s step one. Follow-on steps will focus on on-boarding, talent management, and developing a corporate footprint on people. With these new processes, FEMA will be able to hire faster, get people trained and ready to perform, and have an ongoing picture of its talent and workforce needs.



HELPING HR TRANSFORM

Connections Newsletter

December 2007

Customer Advocacy Team. Because FEMA has so many different types of employees – permanent full-time, 2-year and 4-year disaster workers, reserve force, political appointees, SES, etc. – each with its own set of demands and requirements, Tim's group must be sensitive to each type. So to do this, in the future he will set up a Customer Advocacy Team. This team will consist of workers in each branch of the Human Capital Division who will be appointed to think about improving the experience of a particular customer group. The idea is to have someone in each branch represent each customer group – a customer advocate – so that those needs can be anticipated and met.

Tim and his team bring a new perspective to both the strategic and transactional elements of the Human Capital Division. As an example, when they moved to revamp the hiring process, they began with looking at it from the perspective of the potential candidate. "I've never been a big fan of the standard federal hiring process," said Tim, "If you look at it, it's like we're saying [to potential applicants], 'We dare you to apply!' The application process needs to be less than 30 minutes." This new perspective is helping prepare FEMA to compete in the modern war for talent by adapting its processes while still playing the critical compliance and stewardship roles required of any HR function, and even more so in federal agencies.

Defining Success

Tim said, "If I can achieve three things, I'll feel I've been successful in this post:

First, lead the restructuring of the organization's hiring processes to help the agency meet its hiring goals. We'd like to see 95% of authorized hiring levels by Jun 1, 2008, the beginning of hurricane season.

Second, achieve some level of success in streamlining the hiring process and reducing time to hire and time to fill. Anything less than what it takes us today would be 'goodness.' Today it takes us 85-90 days to fill a job. OPM has achieved 42 days.

Lastly, I'd like to improve the training of managers; increase their capacity to lead and perform their function. Accelerate and professionalize the development of the workforce. We're focused on the 'real managers,' those that touch the day-to-day worker; the equivalent of the platoon leader or first line supervisor."

Tim indicated he looks to the Q12 Model from the Gallup Organization as a "...real touchstone. It's very data-backed. We'll use this model to help continue assessing our progress against our defined priorities."



HELPING HR TRANSFORM

Connections Newsletter

December 2007

Advice to Peers

With the first 90 days behind him, Tim has gained some perspective and can reflect on how he'd advise other HR executives facing similar challenges. He points to four pieces of advice he'd pass on:

Understand who you serve, both above and below. "HR often has a reputation as the 'No Police' or the 'mission prevention' force. I tried to meet with all my internal customers to build some credibility and better understanding of their needs. Once your internal customers know you have their best interests in mind, they'll work with you," said Tim.

Don't get discouraged. Any executive leading major change will face obstacles and resistance. This is only compounded by anything preexisting in the environment that weighs on people's minds and potentially discourages them from actively supporting the change. When Tim stepped into the job a malaise still gripped the agency and his division. The overhang from Katrina and other mistakes and bad press had hit folks hard. "I knew this job was going to be challenging when I took it. You have to stay focused on the mission and not get distracted by all the noise."

Align HR support with the mission. FEMA has a unique mission and therefore the Human Capital Division needs to set itself up to support that mission. As an example, FEMA has a whole disaster response workforce division and an accompanying disaster staffing branch within the division. Tim also notes he has the benefit of a very energetic and motivated workforce, "In some ways we're all adrenaline junkies. We all want to deploy and fulfill our service to the country in its times of need. There are no complaints, no drama about the working conditions." With that drive to fulfill the mission, the division also has a special responsibility to give voice to the compliancy needs of the agency and to provide leadership for the stewardship issues.

Personally set a standard for performance. Tim strongly suggests that one of the top priorities of a leader is to, "...model the behavior. Demonstrating that a higher standard is possible." Tim went on to say that, "In the end, everyone wants to be on a winning team. As a leader, you can create a culture of belonging; giving the group a sense of purpose and identity." When people have a stronger sense of purpose and see themselves as part of a greater whole, they look at every part of their jobs with new vitality.

"Internally people in HR functions 'know' on some level they have a consultative role to play, but often tend to view themselves as transaction processors or regula-



HELPING HR TRANSFORM

Connections Newsletter

December 2007

tory enforcers. By framing the dialog in the context of customer service, we raise the bar and get people to focus on the strategic issues facing organizations as a whole,” Tim said.

Tim and his team are truly setting a new standard for Human Capital Management. As an example, “We took a new look at the new employee orientations. We realized that we needed to orient everything about it – the physical space, where people sat, the information they received – around the employee. We’re now creating a culture of excellence in customer service.” And Tim is paying attention to the details as well as the big picture. In addition to big things like the new customer service center and employee on-boarding, the team has focused on smaller things like including the division’s slogan, “Delivering excellence every time,” in email signatures.

Even as Tim and his team continue to focus on improving the Human Capital Division, they never lose sight of the fundamental reason FEMA exists. “America is filled with people ready to respond and help. You have to hold Americans back. When things get tough, we rally and come forward. The people at FEMA are a great testament to the fiber of the American people.” This really speaks volumes to the important work the Human Capital Division is engaged in as it navigates its transformation. Even though they face a random environment, never knowing where the next disaster or human crisis will strike, Tim and his team can rely on a deep sense of purpose to guide them.