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## Making Government Work Attractive

June 23, 2022 by [Tracy Burrows](#), [Leah LaCivita](#)  
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Since July 2021, at least four million people across the country quit their jobs each month, peaking at 4.3 million in January 2022, according to the [U.S. Dept of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Further, hiring challenges have affected all sectors, including government.

This blog will look at how local governments can build a strong workplace culture that engages current staff and is a powerful tool for attracting new

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workers.

## Changing the Workplace Culture

Recently, MRSC hosted Building a Great Workplace Culture in a Time of Change webinar (now available in our [On-Demand Webinars](#) page under “Leadership”), which featured speakers Charlie Bush, City Administrator with Sedro-Woolley; Andrea Snyder, Deputy City Administrator with Issaquah; and Judy Cash, Employee Development Coordinator with Spokane County.

The way people behave largely shapes an organization’s workplace culture. Ideally, the culture consists of shared values that are established collaboratively and are consistently reinforced and modeled by capable leaders. Cultivating a positive workplace culture takes time and effort, and it’s slow to change. But by consistent attention to some basic principles, such as vision, employee engagement, team building, rituals, flexibility, empathy, and performance management, local government leaders at any level can make a difference in increasing employee engagement and satisfaction.

### Vision, mission, and core values

The public sector attracts employees who connect with the mission of building great communities and expect that their work will contribute to making a difference. But it’s easy to lose sight of that connection unless the workplace culture recognizes and reinforces it. A clear statement of mission and values sets the context for where the organization is going, how it will get there, and what behaviors are expected.

The process of creating the mission and values may be even more important than the words themselves. It should start with a multi-level employee team to lead the process and end with eventual approval by the governing body.

### Keep employees engaged

[Gallup](#) defines engaged employees as those who are “highly involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace.” In 2021, Gallup found that across all sectors, employees report the following: engaged (34%), disengaged (50%), actively disengaged (16%). Employee surveys are an effective tool for measuring employee engagement and helping to map an action plan for enhancing it. The action plan and follow through is critical. Read about Issaquah’s experience below.

### Build great teams

On average, teams make better decisions than individuals, and diverse teams tend to be more effective than homogeneous ones. Harnessing the power of high-functioning teams can really accelerate your organization's ability to achieve its goals, and working on a great team is rewarding experience for most employees, regardless of where they are in their career. Good teams build a great organization.

Hiring for team skills is a key human resources (HR) strategy, as is building a team with a diverse set of strengths.

### Rituals and events

Workplace fun serves a purpose — it can enhance teambuilding, collaboration, and engagement. Leverage activities that employees enjoy and that make the workplace fun. Activities can be sponsored during or even outside of work. If you don't have inclusive rituals or fun events at your organization, create them by engaging with employees on ideas.

### Flexibility

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped not only the workplace, but also worker expectations. Research conducted in February of this year found that [a majority of people](#) teleworking reported doing so out of choice, not necessity (i.e., out of health concerns or because the workplace was closed). Employers that are allowing some degree of teleworking are much more sought after in today's tight job market where job-seekers are putting a spotlight on [flexibility and work-life balance](#).

### Empathy

The emotional and behavioral health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will be with us for many more years. Widespread empathy at all levels will enhance your organizational culture and send a signal to current and prospective employees that yours is an organization which commits to the well-being of its workers. There are likely already pockets of empathy strength in your organization that you can identify and build on.

### Performance

What does effective work look like post-pandemic? Local governments may be discovering the need to restructure how things are done, pausing to pick new key measures and considering questions that may have been overlooked the first time around.

Introducing a [Results Only Work Environment](#) (ROWE) strategy, or a working environment in which employees are paid for results rather than just time on the clock, puts the focus on output and introduces flexibility into the workplace.

## Issaquah as a Case Study

The City of Issaquah is an example of a local government making big changes to how they do business. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the city has shuttered a major office building, moving instead to a work model that focuses on telecommuting coupled with a flexible on-site workspaces. Staff share offices with one another, and city policy is to have staff be onsite one day/week unless job responsibilities require otherwise. Big changes, but how did the city get here?

While the pandemic did have a big impact on new city policies, Issaquah's move reflects years of work that began in 2017, when morale and workload issues led leadership to take action. The following year, a small team composed of employees (from across city departments and at different levels) was formed and tasked with creating a plan to improve organizational culture and employee engagement.

By 2019, the team recommended the city focus on the following priorities:

- Increase employee clarity and connection to city values and priorities,
- Build feedback and recognition tools into more staff processes,
- Create an organizational culture based on growth and development, and
- Increase opportunities for staff to connect and have fun with one another

The city was working on plan implementation when the pandemic hit. Concerned by the potential of dwindling revenues, the city furloughed 10% of its staff in May of 2020 and moved another 45% into fully remote work. These changes further impacted employee morale. As the pandemic continued, it became clear that the city needed to focus on employee engagement and center mental and emotional well-being as well as ensuring that the work of the city was running smoothly. City leaders deepened their employee feedback and recognition skills, and all staff were regularly engaged on how to increase opportunities to connect and simply have fun together.

When city staff were surveyed in early 2022, they suggested a few new  
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- More job-related training opportunities, mentorship, and professional development;
- An agency-wide review of wages/benefits; and
- More balanced workloads for employees.

## National Trends Mirror Local Ones

In some ways, the Issaquah experience mirrors what is happening across the globe. According to a [February 2021 study](#) from Gartner HR Research, 68% of employees are rethinking what they want from their careers. While government agencies have a hard time competing with the private sector in terms of high salaries and generous benefits, a [2022 report from the consulting firm Deloitte](#) argues that government work, with its focus on mission and service, can be attractive to job seekers, and with the right policy changes, government agencies can have an edge over the private sector.

Younger workers, in particular, are looking for flexibility in their jobs, independence, and work-life balance. As retiring baby boomers are replaced by Millennials and Generation Z, workplaces are finding that these workers want a different relationship with their employer. The report identifies five values:

1. A desire for flexibility across all dimensions (including when and where work is done);
2. “Work that works for me;”
3. An emerging entrepreneurial spirit (people are seeking more individual agency, autonomy, and opportunities);
4. A focus on well-being; and
5. A need for purpose and impact from work.

Government agencies score low on several of these values but high on work performed ‘for purpose and impact.’ The report also outlines a number of steps local government employers can take to make their organizations more attractive, noting they should first focus on how they manage and reward workers “using both wage and nonwage incentives that align better with new worker value.”

For example, a local government can provide flexibility in when and where work takes place by adopting a hybrid environment. The report also suggests agencies make it easy for workers to transition in and out of

public sector work with temporary, short-term assignments, alumni programs, and expanded [internship opportunities](#).

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### About Tracy Burrows

As MRSC's Executive Director, Tracy seeks out innovations in local government, tracking trends in management and technology that impact your work. She has over 20 years of local government and non-profit experience, specializing in growth management, transportation, and general city management issues.

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### About Leah LaCivita

Leah joined MRSC as a Communications Coordinator in the fall of 2016 and manages MRSC's blog and webinar training program, in addition to developing website content.

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