

• Administration & management / By Deandra Woody

Personality traits

- A solid waste department has saved \$10
- million in the last two years in performance
- improvements – all by turning to a personality
- assessment method. And it didn't have to
- layoff any one of its 650 full-time employees.

Like many of its peers in some of the nation's largest cities such as Chicago, the City of Houston's Solid Waste Management Department (SWMD) does not charge a user fee for residential solid waste services, and the continued economic downturn has squeezed the department's annual \$77 million budget.

With more than 650 full-time equivalent employees providing collection services to 372,000 residences, the department has faced tens of thousands of dollars in budget cuts in recent years due to declines in the property and sales taxes that are its primary funding mechanism.

But in just the last two years alone, the department has saved \$10 million in performance improvements, including better route management, a new approach to job functions, and improvements in work teams and contracts without a single layoff.

Just a couple miles south of the department's downtown location, consultants from Houston Community College (HCC) have been spending the last two years with maintenance, operational and administrative groups throughout the department to facilitate supervisor and employee communication through a personality assessment to help improve efficiency while saving millions of dollars in operational costs.

It's called the Birkman Method, and is regularly used at the college by Corporate College business consultants to help local employers improve organizational quality and effectiveness. Although SWMD had not used the Birkman, other public sector organizations (such as the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the Houston Port Authority) have.



Personality plus

The Birkman Method is a personality, social perception, and occupational interest assessment identifying usual behavioral styles, underlying motivations, and potential stress behavior resulting from unmet motivational needs. It was first developed in the late 1940s by Roger Birkman, Ph.D. For over 60 years, organizations around the world have used the method as a cornerstone of their organizational development initiatives. It provides an integrated, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive analysis that often eliminates the need for multiple assessments. Anyone can access it online.

Birkman consultants work with HCC as part-time program managers to provide leadership development training.

As budget constraints grew – reflecting recession-related revenue declines due to lower property and sales tax receipts – Director of Solid Waste Management Harry Hayes, who was familiar with HCC’s services, sought the Corporate College’s assessment of current employee skills to see how they could be used to improve service while controlling costs. The consultants assigned by HCC saw the Birkman Method as the ideal tool for such a program.

In order to adapt the Birkman Method to large groups of participants, the consultants did their first assessment in 2009 with a preview group that was selected by Director Hayes from a cross-section of SWMD supervisory and management leadership. The participants were debriefed to provide an explanation of the findings to each individual participant. Following this, the Birkman Method was delivered to 84 participants during a six-month period from 2009 to 2010. There was a two-phase delivery process, phase one being a Birkman Profile and phase two being the Birkman 360 assessment.

Delivery of the Birkman Method in both six-month periods was in a variety of locations: maintenance shops and warehouses as well as locations for administrative and collections personnel.

Consultants developed flow charts based on the behavioral and motivational patterns discovered from the individual responses. Those patterns were analyzed in a variety of ways – by shift, across departments, and by level of responsibility.

An Employee Productivity Program was created to recognize employees who submitted suggestions to their supervisors on how to make jobs and processes more efficient while promoting quality, economy, and safety. A primary focus of suggestions submitted and implemented emphasized leadership team building and development of trust among supervisors and employees.

Two recent suggested improvements show how this focus shaped the department’s enhanced employee involvement.

A 12-person maintenance team, selected from the 160-person maintenance department, undertook to refurbish three existing backup trash collection vehicles into new recycling vehicles. Team members were selected based on their areas of expertise and their past jobs in maintenance. Each in-house conversion costs \$12,000, compared to \$200,000 to purchase a new vehicle. The refurbishment was not a formal process in itself – the parameters of conversion were known, but this was the first time that employees had suggested they could handle it in-house. The effort took four months to complete, and in limited cases a similar effort can be made to refurbish other vehicles.

At SWMD’s Northeast Service Center, one of several business operating locations, a maintenance team of in-house mechanics suggested and undertook an effort to rebuild mechanical pickup arms used on automated collection trucks. This was previously a contracted item in which the arms, which were not covered by any warranty, were sent back to the manufacturer for rebuilding at a cost of \$5,000 each. It was not until the employees suggested and demonstrated that this rebuilding could be done in the Service Center that SWMD undertook it in-house.

Such results have impressed Director Hayes, who called the Birkman method “a great learning tool for our department.” He explains the results this way. “We have received great feedback from peers and management about the process and how it generates leadership. “Our employees have a better understanding of what our mission is and how our cost structure affects it. Because they better understand who they are and how they function, the members of our department are able to adjust their behavior to give us the results we’re looking for in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.”

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