

# In Practice

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## FINANCE

### The City of Vernon Shows the Value of Cooperation and Understanding

BY KATIE LUDWIG

Located 270 miles northeast of Vancouver, British Columbia, the City of Vernon has a population of 40,000 and is the largest city in the North Okanagan Regional District.

#### **“Life is short. Work somewhere awesome.”**

This phrase has become a tag line for the City of Vernon, British Columbia’s talent acquisition and retention efforts. It’s not just a catchy gimmick, though. City leaders embrace this philosophy and have cultivated a collaborative culture to not only ensure that all employees feel valued but also ensure that citizens are receiving the best service.

Raeleen Manjak, director of the city’s Human Resources Division, explained why the city believes collaboration among employees across the entire organization is so important. “Without meaningful collaboration, I don’t think companies are really able to maximize the potential of their employee groups,” she said. She also believes that a diversity

of opinion and ideas enhances the value of collaboration. “I think that when you can look at diversity to work through challenges, it provides opportunities for innovative thinking that really can boost creativity in a way that helps increase efficiency. And efficiency and effective service delivery is part of our mission statement.”

The Human Resources Division has ten employees and is responsible for functions including payroll and benefits, learning and development, labor, employee care, occupational health and safety, and talent acquisition and retention. “Really, our function is to make sure that we provide the very best service that we can to our stakeholders, as well as our shareholders. We are inward-looking,

but we have the philosophy that when we take good care of our people inside the organization, we will take good care of our people outside of the organization,” Raeleen said.

“Our stakeholders are the people inside the organization, and our shareholders are our citizens because they actually are the people that pay tax to the corporation,” she further explained. “We take care of the people who are delivering the service to the very best of our ability, making sure that everybody is well and healthy and able to be innovative and creative within their various positions, and I think that that creates a really good foundational atmosphere for people to provide the best service that we can to our citizens.”

Debra Law is the director of the city’s Financial Services Division, which has 21 employees and is responsible for managing the city’s budget process, preparing financial statements and reports, accepting payments for fees and charges, procuring goods and services, and generating property tax and utility bills.

Debra believes effective communication is essential for collaboration to occur. She described a program organized by Raeleen and her team that brought all city managers, directors, and the chief administrative officer together to gain a common understanding of the issues facing the city. “We were all doing things differently, instead of being cohesive and having one message to all the staff, and I think it showed us as an organization, and me personally, how important it is that we all have that same language, that we all work in the same way, toward the same understanding,” she said.

Raeleen explained that this program was specifically designed and customized for the city around strategic capacity leadership development. It initially consisted of 18 days of learning and engagement



### City of Vernon Values

- **Trust**
- **Integrity**
- **Respect**
- **Being a learning organization**
- **Empowerment**
- **Fostering genuine connections**

and has been renewed each year with a minimum commitment of four to six sessions per year. “This refresh keeps everyone moving forward and reminds us of the necessity for consistency and predictability around our common understanding,” she said.

Debra elaborated on why she believes that these kinds of conversations are so important. “I really like the word ‘understanding’ because I think it is about understanding each other and what our needs are. Keep asking why until you understand what the other person is trying to do and why they’re trying to do it—then I can help you. If you don’t have that mindset of wanting collaboration and understanding, you fail the organization, in my mind,” she said.

Debra gave an example of how she and her staff have taken steps to achieve a common understanding. After

being introduced to the concepts of project management by a Human Resource initiative, she and some of the other finance staff obtained their Project Management Professional certification. She hopes that this new knowledge will help her team as they implement a new enterprise resource planning (ERP) system over the next couple of years.

Larissa Fitchett, executive assistant in the Financial Services Division, works with Debra and the other managers in the division on a variety of special projects. She explained how collaboration has played a role in the city’s recent effort to establish its values. “Just recently we went through a workshop with a facilitator and built the City of Vernon values. Everyone across the organization had the opportunity to attend, and I think that was just a great opportunity to bring everybody in to identify those values.”

As a result of these collaborative sessions, Raeleen said, the city has identified six specific values: trust, integrity, respect, being a learning organization, empowerment, and fostering genuine connections. She explained that they were very conscious about designing this process to be inclusive and collaborative. “This is not a top-down exercise. It’s not the leadership saying, ‘Here, this is what the corporate values are for the organization.’ This was something that was really organic, and everyone was invited to participate. All managers and directors had to provide some time for employees to participate in that.” Raeleen and Larissa both mentioned that employees will remain involved in the work to find ways to implement the values across the entire organization.

Raeleen and Larissa also noted that the city’s part-time staff are included and encouraged to participate in the city’s learning and development and employee engagement opportunities. “These are members of our city community, and they may be full-time employees sometime in the future. We need to invest just as much time and effort in



developing and providing opportunities for them to feel a part of this community as anybody else,” Raeleen said.

Raeleen explained how the city’s learning and development efforts help to lay the groundwork for more effective collaboration. One purpose of the learning and development opportunities the city offers is to “cross-pollinate all of the employees across the organization” by “mixing up our employee groups.”

“I think that brings an opportunity to allow respectful conversation to happen. We’re not perfect, but we’re certainly willing to take a risk so that we can have a better product at the end of the day,” she said. “I think if I were to look back on the research, we might find that a lack of collaboration in the workplace will lead to workplace failures—and I think that we are on the opposite side of that structure. I think we are doing everything we can to have workplace success through collaborative, respectful engagement.”

Debra believes collaboration was a key to her team’s effort earlier this year to make the city’s budget document easier to understand and to reduce its size. She lamented that the document was about 600 pages long and went into too much

detail on individual line items. “For instance, we would have four lines of labor, or contracts, there’d be four or five lines of detail for goods like sand, gravel, asphalt, et cetera. And we said no, we’d like to make it so you just see goods, you just see services, you just see contracts, one line for labor,” she explained.

The senior management team was nervous about making these kinds of changes to the document because the council often likes to get into the details when it is reviewing the budget, Debra said. “So they wanted me to go to Council and ask about it. We set up a document that showed what it might look like, just one department, shrunk down from four pages to two.” The council’s response to this prototype was positive, so she received the go-ahead to work with all the departments to change the format of their budgets.

“It was something that everybody had to work on. They all had to shorten up their descriptions of their departments, and we had to make sure that the descriptions of the changes in the budgets were much smaller than before and less detailed, but very informative,” she explained.



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– **Raeleen Manjak**, director of the City of Vernon Human Resources Division



The City of Vernon has cultivated a collaborative culture to ensure that employees feel valued and can provide the best level of service to citizens.

The council's response to the revised budget document has been positive, Debra said. During this year's public budget meetings, which were done in half the time as in past years, council members expressed their gratitude for the city's work in developing a document that is much more readable than previous versions. Debra credits city-wide collaboration for this success: "Budgeting is something that's organization-wide, and you need cooperation across the whole organization to make it work, and bring it together, much more than anything else that we do in Finance."

The COVID-19 pandemic has also presented the city with challenges, but Raeleen, Debra, and Larissa believe the organization is stronger as a result.

"The City of Vernon was one of the very few, maybe even one of the only municipalities in British Columbia, that stayed open during all of COVID," said Debra. "There was never any call from the province for us to close. We were dumbfounded when we found out others were closing. We put in all the safety protocols that were required by the province, and we stayed open. Our chief administrative officer even said, 'The grocery stores have to stay open. We can stay open,'" she explained.

Through effective collaboration and communication with staff, the city balanced the goals of staying open and keeping staff safe and healthy. It conducted a review of the city's leave policies and made adjustments where necessary to allow people to use leave if they needed to do so (for example, to care for a sick family member or to take care of children because their daycare was shut down). The city also allowed some staff members to work remotely, temporarily.

Debra emphasized how important communication was during the early days of the pandemic. "We had regular meetings, more than weekly—I think they were every day at first—just to make sure that we



were covering everything and thinking of everything that we could to stay open and provide services to the community."

"I think that our team here at the city has an increased resiliency because of that," Raeleen said. "We developed strategies to keep each other safe and healthy. We checked in on each other. We were making sure that our mental wellness was managed during this really unfounded time, and I think as we moved through the months and months of COVID, we just became a stronger, more cohesive group. I can tell you that for me, it was a joy coming to work because I knew that the people here were taking care of each other," she added.

One initiative the city undertook to ensure its employees were being taken care of was "The Ten Hours of Giving Program," which made use of the city's relationships with different organizations to provide services for its employees. Focusing on eight dimensions of wellness, the program included segments on mindfulness and meditation, financial literacy, the importance of sleep and nutrition, and managing anxiety and depression. The program also offered fitness classes like Zumba, yoga, and Pilates. "We curated that data and put it onto our internal YouTube channel so that employees have access to it. They can play it for their families and just look at it repeatedly if they need to during this time," said Raeleen. The content also included messages from the mayor and

The City reinforces its collaborative culture by providing ways for staff to build community. The human resources team found several ways to celebrate the holiday season together, including dressing up as "the elf crew," pictured above.

the chief administrative officer letting employees know how much their work is appreciated and that help is available if they need it.

Although the city has an organizational culture that emphasizes collaboration and empowers employees, Raeleen and Debra both acknowledged that communication and collaboration can sometimes be difficult. When difficulties do arise, they both agreed that slowing down a bit is often most helpful.

"I think sometimes we become focused on what we need to happen right now, instead of just taking a step back for a minute and saying, 'Okay, what can we do to mitigate this issue that we're having in a kind and productive way?'" Raeleen said. "I think the way to do that is to communicate, and sometimes we're really successful, and sometimes we get kind of stuck in our own loop. We have to figure out our way through that, and so I think, for me, one of the big learning lessons is sometimes...you just need to pause, and figure out what the way forward is, and it doesn't need to happen alone."





The City's Financial Services Division is led by Debra Law, director, who stands with executive assistant Larissa Fitchett.

Debra described another challenge to collaboration—the fact that elected officials can and do change every four years, a challenge many local governments face. “Not every council is as willing to work with you as others.” She believes that pausing, taking a step back, and working toward that common understanding can help, though. “We’re not perfect at it, but we try to encourage everybody to make sure they have a good understanding of the issue before they react. So, pausing is definitely one of the ways to do that, and also, not to make assumptions. It’s sometimes easier to hear that than to actually live it—I know there was a time when I’d make assumptions, and I really learned over the years to make sure I ask why and get the whole picture before I react.”

Another way the city reinforces its collaborative culture is by providing opportunities for staff to de-stress and build community. For example, Larissa described how the city’s intranet, an application called Jostle, has proven to be a useful tool to connect with colleagues, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Not only is it used for communication for work purposes, but there is a portion of it where we can connect with people across the city on more of a personal, fun level.” She explained that recently employees

organized a virtual ugly Christmas sweater contest using Jostle. “We were still able to celebrate Christmas, but in a way that was COVID-friendly,” she said. “And they did a Zoom call and judged everybody, and it just saw the teams come together and have fun in a safe way.”

Raeleen described other ways that staff were able to celebrate during the Christmas holiday season—her team dressed up as “the elf crew.” “We all had elf t-shirts and elf hats and elf glasses, just to kind of do a little something inside our cohorts and still have some Christmas spirit.” The city also ordered cookies from a local vendor and delivered individual packages to staff members, along with two city-branded masks. The city also provided individual drink stations inside each building with hot chocolate, cider, and tea. “We delivered them to each of the departments or divisions so they could have a COVID-friendly coffee break, along with their cookies,” she said.

As another way to engage the staff, Debra described how she encouraged staff to help decorate their new office space. The Finance Division’s offices went through a major renovation in the first quarter of 2020, and Debra and Larissa invited all interested staff members to help with decorating the new space. Larissa said she got two volunteers for the project. Together they went shopping a few times to pick art for the walls, including fun signs saying, “Come in, we’re awesome!”

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– **Debra Law**, director of the City of Vernon Financial Services Division

and “It’s cool to be kind.” “I feel like even though other staff members don’t participate, they feel the enthusiasm and the excitement, and it just really helps build everybody’s morale up even though they chose not to participate at the time,” said Debra.

Larissa added that throughout the renovation, she and Debra made sure they were communicating with the staff to let them know what their new workspace was going to look like and ask for their feedback. “I think that really got people to buy in for this huge change that occurred for us,” Larissa explained.

Raeleen shared a similar story about the renovation of the kitchen area in City Hall. She said the old kitchen was “not a welcoming place at all.” The city decided to invest in a new space where employees could feel comfortable and asked staff for feedback on the design. “We put together three or four different color palettes and sent it around and had everybody in City Hall vote on what they thought would be the best way to move forward,” she said.

The new kitchen features modern appliances, a television, and a quiet room where people can shut the door if they just want to be by themselves during their break or during lunch. “It’s just a really welcoming place to be now,” she said. ■