Development and Implementation of the Employee Relations Strategic Plan in the City of Torrance

I. Background of the City’s Strategic Plan

In the early 1990’s, the downturn of the State’s economy caused cities to implement cost cutting measures in order to balance municipal budgets. The City of Torrance was no exception. Many of the budget reductions in Torrance were implemented through deletion of vacant positions. In so doing, however, there was no chance to downsize in an organized fashion, nor was there an evaluation of the importance of the services that remained. Thus, the “downsized” budget did not necessarily reflect the community’s priorities.

Because of this, the management of the City of Torrance began to realize that the City had veered away from any long range planning. With this in mind, the City developed and implemented a City-wide Strategic Plan.

In the City of Torrance, Strategic Planning is defined as a process for anticipating the future, seeking input from the community, and creating a common vision. Torrance’s Strategic Plan is thus a guide for all City actions, programs and priorities over the next several years. The Plan is intended to be updated and fine-tuned periodically to ensure that it continues to be current and relevant.

The Strategic Plan was intended to be a “Community Plan” and was developed with input from the community. This included contributions from the public at large, the business community, local students and City employees. The resulting plan includes a series of components, including the following:

- **Vision** Describes the community achieving its full potential. The vision drives the Strategic Plan
- **Preamble** The community’s commitment in making the Vision become a reality
- **Mission** Expresses the City government’s purpose
- **Values** Describes those key attributes which are the most important to the community and the City
- **Strategic Priorities** The issues which are important for the community to address over the next ten years

There are nine separate Strategic Priorities in the City’s Plan. Each priority is equal and all priorities are interrelated. Each City program ties back to the priorities which are used to evaluate successful City operations for the future.

Each City program ties its operations back to Strategic Priorities which are divided into goals and subgoals. Of the several Strategic Priorities which were developed, there was one priority which contained goals and subgoals that were pertinent to the Employee Relations function. That priority was: “Responsive, accountable and cost effective Government” and has as some of its pertinent goals and subgoals, the following:

- **Cost effective ways of doing business**
  - Efficiency and productivity of employee work schedules
• Skilled knowledgeable, and well trained workforce which enhances productivity and cost effectiveness in service delivery
  - Continuing education and training
  - Employee health and safety
  - Broadly skilled workforce
  - Position descriptions and/or classifications which allow flexibility of job assignments

This relates to how employees are hired, the conditions under which they work, and how they are trained. Thus, each goal can be linked in some way to the Memoranda of Understanding, Personnel Policies and procedures. Civil Service rules and Departmental work rules.

II. Background of Employee Relations in the City of Torrance

The City Manager’s Office oversees Employee Relations in the City. From the inception of the Meyers-Milius-Brown Act, an Assistant to the City Manager has been the Chief Labor Negotiator for the City. The number of bargaining units has fluctuated but has ranged from 13 to 17.

Prior to the recent development of the City’s Strategic Plan, the City Manager’s Office developed goals and objectives for the Employee Relations program, but those goals were broad, there was no tracking of accomplishments from year to year and there was no method to gather detailed input from the City Management. With the inception of the City’s Strategic Plan, however, Employee Relations took on a new, organized and vital approach to accomplish the strategic priorities in the City. The City’s Strategic Plan gave the Employee Relations function specific goals to achieve, and these would be goals that would be evaluated for success every year, and which would also be fine tuned as necessary.

III. The Current Employee Relations Strategic Plan

A. The Employee Relations Team

The Employee Relations Team was formed to develop an Employee Relations Plan tied to the City’s Strategic Plan. This team was in existence in one form or another for over ten years. However, in 1996, after the development of the City’s Strategic Plan, the team divided into two distinct sub teams, and developed its own mission statement, objectives, and five year projection.

The two distinct subteams are: a core team and a working team. The Core Team is made up of

• The chief negotiator for the City, (who is the author of this article and Assistant to the City Manager),
• The other two lead negotiators (a second Assistant to the City Manager and the Assistant Finance Director)

The mission of the Core Employee Relations Team is:
To implement the Employee Relations Strategic Plan through the meet and confer process.

The Objectives of the team are to:

- Provide constructive feedback to each negotiator on proposals and input to and from employee groups
- Formulate negotiating strategy
- Act as a forum to brainstorm and gain feedback on dynamics of negotiations
- Bring specific ideas to the working team for input, language formation and creation of the strategic plan.
- Meet weekly (during the meet and confer process)
- Attend executive sessions with the City Council to present updates and plan to the City Council and to receive instructions.

In short, the Core Team provides a forum to discuss negotiations strategies.

The Employee Relations Working Team is made up of the Core Team members along with the following:

- Personnel Director
- General Services Director
- Civil Service Administrator
- Sanitation Supervisor
- Payroll Supervisor
- Police Captain.

The membership was designed to provide a cross section of Department Heads and Managers representing a variety of Departments and supervising employees in most of the City’s bargaining units. It was also created to be a group of individuals that could determine whether or not objectives were attainable and useful to the City.

The mission statement of the Employee Relations Working Team is:

To develop an Employee Relations Strategy in order to achieve a skilled, knowledgeable and well trained work force which enhances productivity and cost effectiveness in service delivery.

Objectives of the Working Team are to:

- Receive input from stakeholders including City Council, Department Heads, Managers and employees
- Develop, validate and revise strategic plan for employee relations
- Develop specific language to be used as proposals for employee negotiations
- Develop plans for “kick off” executive sessions for City Council.

The Employee Relations Working Team is a forum for key Managers and the negotiators to talk about the specific objectives to be accomplished in the negotiating process, and to develop and fine tune strategies during negotiations.
B. Developing the Plan by the Employee Relations Team

The Employee Relations Team came up with ideas to create a strategic plan, but it was felt that more input was needed to create a City-wide blueprint. To that end, a roundtable session was held with about 75 managers, department heads and professionals. The managers were divided into small, homogeneous groups and were asked to develop a list of problems in the various Memoranda of Understanding along with potential solutions. The groups were told that the solutions needed to tie to the City’s Strategic Plan and particularly the Strategic Priority “Responsive, accountable and cost effective government.”

Traditional brainstorming techniques were used. Lists of problems and solutions were developed. At the conclusion of the session a “top ten” list was developed and put in priority order.

From this list, six broad elements of the Employee Relations Plan were developed. Each year after the Memoranda of Understanding are readopted and language is modified, the plan will be updated.

C. Elements of the Employee Relations Plan

Based on the process as outlined above, the Elements of the Employee Relations Plan were developed as follows:

- **Employee Selection**
  Expand the City’s ability to recruit, select and retain employees who possess the skills and knowledge required to succeed in a job. Employees should also reflect the organizational culture and values in order to meet organizational expectation.

- **Compensation**
  Develop a system which is based on cost effective service delivery and high level of productivity. It should also be based on merit, performance and achievement of competencies.

- **Classification**
  Develop a plan which allows for flexibility in job assignment. This flexibility will enrich employees’ job and allow effective assignment of appropriate staffing for services to the public.
  Develop a classification structure that provides employees an opportunity to acquire collateral skills in preparation for either lateral movement or promotion.

- **Performance Appraisal**
Develop a measurable appraisal system which ties to the compensation and class plan.

- **Operational Rules**

Modify policies and procedures in order to assist managers in effectively directing the work force.

- **Employee Development**

Motivate employees to pursue in-house and external opportunities in education and training.

**IV. Annual Employee Relations Objectives**

Based on the development of the Employee Relations Plan, the Employee Relations Working Team was able to develop specific objectives to be accomplished during the 1996 and 1997 negotiations. These objectives were suggestions taken directly from the Manager’s Roundtable meetings. For 1996, the following objectives were developed:

- **Modify classification language so that Managers can more easily change class specifications.** *(Existing language required that the parties meet and agree. If the parties did not agree, the proposed new classification language would be shelved.)*

  This tied to the “Classification” element of the Plan.

- **Modify the civil service system to use a form of “banding” to select employees from an eligible list.** *(Existing rules required the rule of three)*

  This tied to the “Employee Selection” element of the Plan.

- **Modify sick leave language so employees would have to provide better proof of illness if they were suspected sick leave abusers.** *(Existing language was lax)*

  This tied to the “Operational Rules” section of the Plan.

For the 1997 negotiations, the following objectives were developed.

- **Modify ‘move up” language so managers have more latitude in appointments to temporarily vacant positions.** *(Current language was very restrictive)*

  Tied to “Operational Rules” of the Plan.

- **Reduce the Industrial Injury benefit to discourage abuse and encourage return to work of injured employees.** *(Existing benefit often...*)
provided more take home pay when an employee was injured than while the employee was working)

Tied to “Operational Rules” and “Compensation”.

The final page of this document outlines the accomplishments of the Employee Relations Plan over its two year life span, and gives an outlook as to the coming three years.

V. City Council Input

Throughout the development of the Employee Relations Plan, the City Council gave direction and approval to the Chief Labor Negotiator. In a series of Executive Sessions, the City Council was updated as to the development of the elements of the Plan as well as the specific objectives to be accomplished. Throughout the process, the City Council was very receptive and supportive.

In fact, over the past two years of negotiations, all of the above objectives were accomplished. This was due to the strong Councilmanic support of the process and of the labor negotiators themselves. It was also helpful that the negotiators could tie the development of the Employee Relations Plan and the specific annual objectives to the strategic plan for the City.

This Plan is now being evaluated for measures of success, and all of the success will be evaluated as part of the overall City of Torrance Strategic Plan.

VI. Summary and Conclusions

For many of the 18 years that the author of this article has been a labor negotiator, various City Council members would ask from time to time, “What did we accomplish in labor negotiations this year….other than giving some raises?” With the implementation of the Employee Relations Strategic Plan that is tied to the City’s Strategic Plan, the success can be measured on an annual basis. Furthermore, the success can be tied back to the desires of the managers of the City as well as the community itself.

While it is a somewhat time consuming process, the development of the plan makes the entire negotiation process more significant and useful. It also makes the labor contracts with the city more meaningful and dynamic.

Paper prepared by

Kathy Keane
Assistant to the City Manager
City of Torrance
3031 Torrance Blvd.
Torrance, Ca. 90503