



McCabe Photography



Shore thing

If North Shore City Council people capability manager Beryl Oldham is certain of anything, it's that local government is an exciting place to be, and getting to know your staff and investing in their development pays off. She tells Lyndsey Swan why.

Local government isn't sexy—yet! But give North Shore City Council's people capability manager Beryl Oldham half the chance and she'd change that. She's adamant that if people knew just how exciting and diverse the sector was, they would definitely want to work in it.

"There are good careers in local government, but for some reason it's not seen as a very sexy place to work," she says. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone say 'I want a career in local government'."

Oldham joined the sector four years ago when she took on the learning and development role at North Shore City Council, after 25 years in the Royal New Zealand Navy. She's clearly loving it and says she's proud to be working at council, but she believes they need to do more to market themselves to prospective employees.

"We've got some really passionate people doing some wonderful things here, but I think they can find [the public's reaction] difficult. They sometimes don't want to tell people they work for council," she says, describing the 'Eew, you work for them' response and the complaints about rubbish collections and resource consents that can greet such news. "We'd like to change that and make people realise how important council is and what it can do for them. And hopefully we'll attract more young people."

North Shore City is New Zealand's fourth largest city and one of the fastest growing regions in New Zealand. The council offices in the heart of Takapuna are no more than a hop, step and jump from one of Auckland's most popular beaches and, while I didn't get to see it, I am certain Mayor Andrew Williams has a great view of Rangitoto and the region's extensive shoreline from his office. After all, it is his patch.

Oldham says the duality of the council—and other local government organisations—creates an interesting balance. "You have the political side, with the elected members, and the corporate side with the council officers, who are here to support the politicians and assist with continuity. They're very different sides of the organisation and that adds an extra complexity," she says. "We've got a new crew in now [after last year's local body



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elections] and our job is to support them with their aims for the city. It’s a dynamic environment and it makes local government a very exciting place to be.”

It’s not just the possibility of working for new masters following the three-yearly local body elections that make council an interesting place to work. Oldham says she didn’t realise how diverse the organisation was until she joined and took the bus tour of council sites that all new staff go on. “We’ve got a cemetery, we’ve got a sewage plant, we’ve got the whole infrastructure services that people expect in their living environment,” she laughs.

Around 900 full-time staff—or 1350 with the part-timers working in areas like the leisure and library facilities—work in a range of roles in six separate divisions: infrastructure, community services, environmental services, strategy and policy, finance and corporate services, and customer and information services. The first three are separate business units and the latter three provide services across the organisation.

The day I visit is also the first day on the job for the council’s new group manager of human resources Francois Schoeman. He’ll be heading up a team of 11 which, along with Oldham in the people capability role, includes three HR advisors—who each have a business unit and one of the service divisions to look after—a recruitment advisor and recruitment assistant, a health and safety manager and health and safety coordinator, and an HR administrator.

“Our HR advisors and our recruitment advisor are called advisors because that’s what they do,” says Oldham. “They work with management to advise them. We’re working on a decentralised model where we’re trying to get managers to take responsibility for the HR function as much as possible. We’re there to assist them, to give them ideas, help them with legal issues et cetera. It’s very much an advisory role.”

Like most organisations in today’s climate, the recruitment and retention of good staff is a challenge. Getting the best people for the job and then keeping them are of prime importance in this multi-cultural workplace.

“It’s all about having good recruitment and selection standards and then, once you’ve got them in the door, you’ve got to keep on treating them like you still want to recruit them,” says Oldham. “Quite often in organisations people come in and, once you’ve got them, it’s same old, same old. It becomes boring and mundane. If you want that employer of choice brand you’ve got to carry on wooing your employees as if you’re still trying to recruit them, because that’s the way you’re going to keep them engaged.”

She believes the key to this is finding out what employees want, and providing them with opportunities for development.

“If you want to motivate your staff, you’ve got to know what

makes them tick,” she says. “Giving a discount for gym membership, which we can easily do because we’ve got leisure centres, isn’t necessarily going to do it for everybody. It’s about finding out what staff really value as individuals, and that comes back to management talking to their staff. We don’t spend enough time tapping in to what people want—and quite often they want a lot less than what you think they want. We make it so complex.”

One of the problems for HR is that some people want rules around everything, says Oldham. Writing a policy so that it gives enough guidance to managers, and yet is liberal enough to give them the discretion to meet people’s needs in an equitable way, is difficult.

“This is a challenge, this is huge,” she says, thumping the desktop to drive home her point. “I want to tap into that. Equity is not necessarily about giving everyone the same. It’s about offering people choices—within reason. I’d like to get to a point where we’ve got a smorgasbord of choices and staff can pick and mix.”

Part of that smorgasbord is providing career development opportunities. While the number one priority for North Shore City Council will always be the ‘must-have’ training that ensures people are competent in their roles, staff are also encouraged to pursue the advanced skills that will make them better at their job. And for those who may have a change of career in mind, there are also opportunities for personal development—so long as their study is related to council business.

“They have to show success in what they’re doing for us to continue funding them, but we see it as a retention area for staff,” says Oldham. “We’re dealing with rate payers’ money and we have to be careful with that. We are very conscious of being frugal, but we believe in developing people and we think that it saves money in the long term because they’re more likely to stay.”

“If you can keep good people and move them around the organisation, that’s a benefit—getting that mix happening in the organisation helps break down those silo type barriers you get sometimes, and cross-fertilisation takes place. It’s a win for everybody really.”

Oldham says one of her greatest challenges is convincing managers to invest time in their staff now. “Managers have the best intentions, but they’re busy people. We’ve got to encourage them to make that commitment to staff, give them some one-on-one time to find out what’s really going on for them, and to find out how they can help them develop. The more you develop your staff, the better it is for you as a manager—they’re going to make you look good,” she laughs, recalling something she read recently: ‘The long-term development of staff isn’t on everyone’s to-do list for next week’.

She’s clearly on a mission to change that, saying she feels blessed to work in a role that’s all about helping people develop, and building the capability of the organisation.