

Exit Report

Addendum to Organizational Analysis

Presented to: The Port of Benton

By: Eileen Griffin-Ray, MBA, Ph.D.

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Upon completion of my contract term, several temporary policies and processes have been implemented to address some of the most critical issues at the Port based on the organizational analysis submitted in March. Policy changes are temporary unless or until the Commission approves each new policy. After policy changes are implemented, it is up to Port leadership to decide to implement and manage the new policies and organizational changes.

Future recommendations have been made and more will need to be done, but several things have been initiated in a short period of time. These preliminary changes and fixes should enhance the employment experience, increase the efficiency and structure of the organization, and improve legal compliance and business practices.

Further issues identified and suggestions offered provide a road map for leadership to drive the organization forward.

Structure

An organizational restructuring has been proposed, and some changes have already been implemented. The proposed restructuring includes three senior leaders with separate areas of responsibility. The proposed structure allows for a focused leadership team and growth and development in layers below.

A strategic staffing plan should be developed by the leadership team at some point, so the organization grows while remaining disciplined and ordered. Staffing decisions should be financially responsible and should be tightly managed so the organization does not add employees or functions without thorough assessment of the need and how it benefits the overall organization.

The current proposed chart separates out leadership functions with one group handling the external public-facing group responsible for economic development, government relations,

community relations, and business development, and a second division managing the operations, facilities, and construction. The third group includes accounting, finance, human resources, real estate/leasing, and technology. This proposal will go to the Commission for consideration.

Support staff members are needed for back-up, cross training and organizational development. Staff hired at a lower level will provide for future needs and succession planning. Some changes have already been approved and implemented.

An administrative assistant was hired in March. The role provides front desk support, reception duties, phone, customer service, and a wide range of administrative support for staff and Commission. She will be working on special events, Port activities, and helping with communication. This role has already proven very beneficial to the organization.

An additional person was hired to provide support for finance and human resources. This role allows both the senior accountant and the accounting specialist to delegate clerical duties providing more time for the higher-level accounting functions. This support person handles filing duties, check tracking and administration. She has taken on several administrative tasks under human resources including employee file maintenance, new employee paperwork, payroll and benefits support. Accounting staff can now focus on higher level tasks and grow their skills and value to the Port.

One employee who had previously resigned was successfully recruited back to the Port by the interim executive director. He was hired as a senior manager of engineering overseeing construction projects and contracts and reports to the interim executive director. This provided an opportunity for some structure and team building. This group is actively engaged in improving the department by looking for technological solutions to improve processes.

Other structural changes have been implemented to streamline roles and provide logic within job families. The challenge will be to train and redirect people to help each employee stay in their lane going forward. The goal is that teams will build and projects will be completed in an organized fashion as each team member is appreciated for the skills they bring and the role they fulfill. Three separate divisions should work as three teams with focused areas of responsibility. If everyone is clear on their own role and the roles of others, fewer items should fall between the cracks and if something doesn't get done, there should be clear accountability.

Job descriptions have been completed for all employees. Working collaboratively with staff, the job descriptions are now reflective of the work each employee is doing. There is consistency and logic between jobs, job families, and the overall organization. This will

grow and change over time, but it should be done thoughtfully and methodically, not haphazardly.

Team meetings can help the interrelationships between work groups. I facilitated a meeting between the engineering, construction and facilities, leaders. There was some confusion about roles and responsibilities amongst the groups. With open discussion, the group was able to collaborate and make decisions allowing the team to function more effectively with fewer conflicts. They established boundaries, clarity, and methods for better communication and coordination. Hopefully, this group will have ongoing meetings. A cross-functional team began working new forms and checklists using technology to make the tools useful, beneficial, and efficient. This group of talented individuals can solve problems and improve many areas of the organization if they meet regularly and work collaboratively. There is more talent at the Port that can be developed with more attention paid to each individual employee; their skills, interests, and career path.

Some areas such as real estate and leasing/data systems will need more assessment and consideration going forward. Since these are business critical roles, it might be beneficial to start soon training and developing a talent pipeline in this area. With the proximity of CBC and WSU Tri Cities, an intern program could be an option.

Leadership

Leadership was identified as an area needing improvement at the Port. Many employees described an unhealthy work environment. One employee described the previous leadership as “cruel” and she said it impacted her mental health. “I saw others suffering and I had to say something. I just couldn’t watch the cruelty.”

An interim executive director has been in place for several months now and there is already a significant difference in the office environment. Employees seem to be more positive and upbeat. Throughout the office, laughter can be heard frequently.

The interim executive director is “hands-on” and an example of an engaged working manager. He is aware of all aspects of the organization and seems to have a good sense of what is happening across the various functions. He has reorganized his direct reports, giving more responsibility to his managers, freeing up capacity for his expanded temporary role. He has one-on-ones to make sure that each employee has an opportunity for individual interaction.

The interim ED has established a protocol for interaction between himself and the Commissioners to improve the connection between the Port and the Commissioners. He

holds regular meetings with each of the commissioners, allowing them to ask questions and improve their awareness of ongoing Port functions and activities.

Entering the building is a different experience than it was three months ago. Having a smiling person at the front desk, greeting and welcoming people immediately changes the atmosphere in the office. A second person is prepared to be the back-up to prevent random individuals having to run to the front to try to haphazardly deal with incoming visitors. The organization appears orderly, calm, and friendly.

Once the leadership team is established, it is up to the Commission to hold leadership accountable. The Commissioners should expect to be included in more strategic discussions about staffing, planning, budgeting and spending. Several new policies include an approval process routed through Commission. Communication between senior leaders and the commissioners is critical and they should continue having regular individual meetings.

Hiring and retaining skilled leaders will be a critical role and responsibility of the Commission going forward. The Port will not see the benefit of policies and procedures unless leadership implements them and ensures compliance. Leadership will make the difference between continued chaos and confusion or stability and structure. Leadership sets the tone and it resonates throughout the organization.

Policies

Several policies have been drafted, revised, or expanded to address missing pieces within the organization. Several staff members expressed that there was a great deal of confusion about policies.

It was noted by one employee that the person who was expected to advise on policies, often gave conflicting information. Even asking for clarity did not result in understanding. The employee said with confusing policies she tried to ask for clarification but instead often got contradictory information. “There was lots of confusion. Massive confusion.”

At this point, several policies have been drafted or revised and are waiting for Commission review and approval. Implementation of these policies will make it easier for employees to know what the rules are, and how to follow them. All employees need to become familiar with policies and be trained in how to comply. Policies should be reviewed annually and updated or clarified as needed. Leadership must follow policies, enforce policies, advise others accurately regarding policies and model behaviors.

Hiring Policy

Hiring practices were inconsistent and unreliable at the Port with minimal screening of candidates. A recruitment plan and workflow has been developed and made available to hiring managers. We tested the new policy as we hired two administrative staff. The policy worked well. The next step is to automate the checklist to make it more efficient, which the data systems administrator has already solved and is in the process of implementing. He will continue to take the lead making other checklists efficient as well.

Onboarding

New employees struggle at the Port without a proper onboarding or orientation program. Employees start with minimal training and often a new employee often does not have the benefit of learning from the prior person holding their position as they have already left the Port.

An onboarding checklist was drafted for all employees and then the staff developed a thorough onboarding program that covers a broad range of very important aspects of the Port and the job. The onboarding program introduces new employees and makes them feel welcome. Special touches include a tour of Port locations, a get-to-know-you lunch for all staff and a visit to the Tritan. The work done by the manager of communications and public relations and the data systems administrator on this project was excellent. The template is available now to any hiring manager and can be utilized for any new hire.

Other staff all contributed to creating a robust onboarding program. Onboarding is now a team effort and a positive experience. This is a major success in what has been a major sore spot for the Port. Thanks to the staff committed to creating a genuinely welcoming experience for new hires, the Port now has an excellent onboarding program.

Employee Transitions Policy

Employees had expressed frustration with the random nature of promotions and salary adjustments. The documentation for a change in pay is a standard form letter which does not really address the specific reason for the salary adjustment as all letters are the same. In some cases, they are contradictory.

Favoritism was mentioned as a concern. Some employees were promoted to new roles in what seemed like a spontaneous move with no planning or accommodation for the change as it impacted others in the organization.

An employee transitions policy has been drafted that gives structure and consistency to promotions and salary adjustments. The policy also requires that salary adjustments be

reviewed in terms of budget impact. This is a necessary step as the Port seeks to be more attentive to costs and taxpayer expense.

A form has been drafted that explains the reason for the salary adjustment. It can be used as part of an employee review process, or separately for a review outside of the review process.

Salary adjustments will require signed approvals by the manager, the ED, and they will also have to be approved by the Commission. This will provide checks and balances and should eliminate random, seemingly arbitrary, salary adjustments given in the past. The manager requesting the adjustment for his or her employee will be expected to provide justification and if it is determined to be insufficient, the request may be denied.

Part of an employee transition is an exit from the organization. There was no employee checklist at the Port and employees revealed that one employee left with a Port-issued gas card and was able to fill up his personal vehicle with gas after leaving employment. Another employee left without turning in keys to tenant buildings. An exit checklist has now been developed.

The facilities manager requested and supported the creation of a thorough inventory for all facilities staff. This has been completed. There is now a list of all Port-issued items including a long list of building keys, truck and equipment keys, fobs, etc. so that the facilities manager can easily determine what items are in the possession of the staff and he can use that list as a reference when completing an exit checklist to ensure that a departing employee does not retain any Port-owned or Port-issued items or access. This should allow for a thorough exit process.

Employee Travel Policy

The Employee Handbook has been revised with a more detailed and managed travel policy. The travel policy places guardrails to help ensure conservative use of taxpayer funds. Before an employee or commissioner travels at the expense of the Port, all transportation, lodging, and conference fees must be approved at various levels of management, including the Commission.

Nepotism Policy

Questions were raised about whether or not the Port allowed the hiring of relatives. It was discussed and decided that a Nepotism Policy should be implemented. With a small staff, any hiring of relatives could adversely impact the organization. A policy has been drafted to address nepotism.

Part-Time Employee Policy

Due to what sounds like a special deal made by previous leadership, one employee who left a full-time role and became part-time was allowed to retain full benefits as if he was still a full-time employee. This has set a precedent that will be costly to the Port. Normally, a part-time employee is not eligible for fully paid benefits nor are they provided with full-time PTO. Currently, the Employee Handbook lists part-time as a status within the Port employee definitions, but there are no details about how a part-time employee is differentiated from a full-time employee. A policy was drafted to address this gap in the Employee Handbook.

Temporary Employee Policy

Like the part-time employee, the Employee Handbook lists temporary employee as a status option at the Port but does not provide any details on how people in this status are treated. A policy was drafted to address this.

Public Relations Policy

There was no public relations policy in place, and the Port currently receives a fair amount of attention from the press. It was discussed in an all-staff meeting and explained to staff that it was important to have a clear message when dealing with the press. Additionally, the staff needed to be reminded of the importance of having all messaging and branding coming from one source. The Port has a staff member who manages public relations. This policy directs all staff to her for any public relations needs.

Education/Training Policy

The education policy has been rewritten to provide common sense parameters for the taxpayers who fund the Port. Previously, this program had been described as confusing, and there was no consistent approval process. This is an amazing benefit provided by the Port. The Port just needs to ensure that all employees are taking classes that are job-related and relevant for the Port's needs. The Commission now has a role in the approval process providing a system of checks and balances for this valuable benefit.

On-Call Policy

Another sore spot for employees has been the On-Call Policy. This has been revised to provide compensation for employees who are asked to be available on evenings and weekends.

Dress code

A dress code policy has been proposed as requested by staff.

Background Check/Drug Screen

A concern identified during the initial analysis was that the Port does not conduct background checks or drug screening prior to hire. Employees at the Port have keys to tenant buildings. They have access to tenant facilities and vehicles. It is irresponsible to allow employees access to tenant properties without having the confidence of a background check.

The pre-hire screening process now includes a background check and drug screen for all new employees. An offer of employment will be contingent upon passing both screenings.

Employment Process: Hiring, Managing, Exiting

There were a number of missing pieces identified during the initial review period. Further problems were subsequently noticed as more work was initiated.

After being made aware that one employee had refused to provide documents for the I-9, yet she remained employed, it was determined that an I-9 audit should be conducted. After completion of the audit, several more missing or incomplete I-9s were discovered. Staff is in the process of correcting this deficiency and they have been trained to be sure this important task is handled properly going forward.

While the Port does follow a disciplinary process, it is not described in the Employee Handbook. The Handbook should identify a progressive disciplinary process if that is what the Port follows. With so many employees coming and going, there is risk of inconsistency in how employee disciplinary matters are handle. Having a policy outlined in the handbook should mitigate that to some extent. With so many new managers and without the guidance from the Handbook, it is unlikely that there is a consistent, reliable approach at this time. When the Port had an in-house attorney, he likely managed a process to ensure uniformity and adherence to the law. Without the in-house attorney and without an experienced human resources person, a thorough policy is critical.

It was discovered through discussion that the Port's payroll system pre-fills time sheets. While staff can go into the system and change the hours, if they do not, the system pre-fills supposing a 40-hour work week. For non-exempt workers, this system is insufficient and does not fulfill wage and hour law requirements under the fair labor standards act (FLSA). It does not document time-in and time-out, just provides a total number of hours. Further it does not document the mandatory lunch break. Employees should be timing-out for lunch and back in when they return. The Port needs a reliable payroll system that is fully implemented and utilized including timesheets. The system must provide timesheets that include all the hours documentation for an accurate payroll. Fixing this may require a new

payroll system. At the very least it will require significant changes to the system in place. This is a critical project that should become a top priority for the director of finance.

Financial Oversight and Responsibility

The unreliable financial oversight has meant that the interim ED and Commission have been functioning and trying to make decisions without the confidence of a budget and dependable expense tracking. With unreliable current data, many financial decisions have been deferred waiting for the new director of finance to start.

The finance/accounting staff has been overworked for quite some time, missing the day-to-day involvement of a manager. The team has good ideas and would like to make the department run smoother with fewer manual processes.

The new director of finance should be focused on modernizing the department, creating efficiencies, and reducing workload.

Communication and Training

An all-employee communication channel is in the process of being drafted and should be launched by the communications and public relations manager in the near future. Once this piece is complete, a team will be making documents, forms, and all things relevant to employees available either on the intranet or through connections to Sharepoint. This process has been started with an initial team meeting was held. This will be an ongoing project. I believe this will become a great asset to all employees.

Employee Reviews/Feedback/Recognition

The Port has had a very high turnover rate in the last few years. The low retention rate has severely damaged the Port as replacing employees is very expensive and each employee who leaves takes their knowledge and experience with them leaving a gap at the Port.

One employee specifically mentioned the lack of recognition as one of her disappointments with her tenure at the port. “They did not recognize me or anyone. There is not a lot of recognition for anyone as a whole. I was not recognized at all or complimented but if anything was said, it was flippant.”

An exit interview has been added to the interview checklist. As an employee prepares to exit, these tools should be utilized going forward. Employee retention should be a focus of

Port leadership going forward. Providing recognition if not difficult and it should be done when warranted. Achievements should be celebrated. Employees should be recognized when they reach a stated goal. There are lots of ways to recognize staff.

A new annual review process needs to be drafted. Discussions were held but work on this was not started as I determined that there would be versions of the document for different areas of the organization. Input from those who manage employees is critical for establishing a worthwhile review program. Employees need effective feedback that helps them improve and advance. The current annual review process can be improved and modernized.

The Importance of Retention

The Port should be consistently attentive to turnover. A report should be provided at least quarterly to the Commission. Turnover rates should be calculated, documented, and presented to the Commission.

The Port has not been consistently following some employment laws. In some cases, it looks as though the Port had processes in place and then tasks were abandoned when the employee who had managed the task or operation left the organization. There is inconsistency in legal compliance, in part, due to high turnover and lack of transference during a transition.

Without consistent recruitment, hiring, and onboarding, important process to ensure legal compliance can be missed. Without any documented procedures or checklists, each new hire becomes a challenge, and each candidate represents risk. Each employee must go through a consistent, fair, and thorough hiring process to ensure that all laws, rules, and policies are followed.

In 2024, three key employees left the Port. The senior accountant, internal port counsel, and the director of real estate all left around the same time. With an employee base of 20-25 employees those 3 represent a significant loss. Responsibilities for each of these missing critical people fell to the director of finance. He noted the difficulty of that in his annual review stating that, "we are one-deep in many functions." He requests leniency with the assessment of his performance that year as he was overwhelmed with covering for, and eventually filling, those positions.

In December of 2024, the ED comments on the review that there is a need for an additional person to cover the tasks formerly handled by the internal attorney, presumably meaning human resources among other things. Neither an attorney nor a human resources

professional was ever hired. Towards the end of 2025, the director of finance announced his resignation.

Employees need to feel supported and they need to be listened to when they complain about being overwhelmed and overburdened. Many employees never speak up, and managers do not get the chance to correct and adjust to make the department better. Those who do speak up may be reflecting more than their own concerns. If they have an issue, it should be heard. It may be that they need help catching up. It may be that they need help becoming more efficient. It may be that they need help prioritizing. The bottom line is that they need help and that should be taken seriously.

Future improvements for the Port would include an employee concerns program so staff have an outlet if they are not being heard by management or if they just feel more comfortable having a mediator or spokesperson when they approach management. The Port will likely benefit from adding an in-house attorney or a human resources manager or both.

Conclusion

Analyzing the organization resulted in a number of issues and concerns. Some problems had to be dealt with as quickly as possible, and others will take time to address. Improving structure, order, and leadership at the Port will reduce employee turnover and create a better functioning organization. Several employees are committed to building a better working environment and a stronger Port. The organization is fortunate to have that backbone of a loyal employee base.

Changes need to take place for the Port to eventually become known as a well-run organization. Work has already begun and hopefully will continue. Structure has been established and policies will provide order and guidance. Skilled leadership will be needed ongoing. Change is never easy and significant cultural change will not happen overnight, but with a team committed to making it happen, it is far more likely, and the outcome will be well worth the effort.