

“Walking the Talk”—A Case Study of the Togus ME Regional Office

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Introduction

In the pursuit of quality improvement, organizations often overlook hidden gems of excellence by looking at the wrong indicators or looking at measures of performance as separate and independent rather than mutually interactive. Thus was the case with the Togus ME regional office. While national efforts were focusing on case management, inventory management techniques, the balanced scorecard, succession planning, new computer applications such as CAPS, and other initiatives, the Togus ME regional office was quietly going about the process of re-engineering their entire way of doing business by *integrating* these improvements and others into a single system of benefit delivery, incorporating both processes and values. Although the term “walk-the-talk” is overused, all evidence points to a sincere and consistent effort within this regional office, to serve the veteran above all other competing factors.

Overview

The Surveys and Research Staff within the Veterans Benefits Administration has been gathering data on customer and employee satisfaction for several years following the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in 1993. In January 2001, the results of the 2000 Compensation and Pension Satisfaction Survey were released to the Under Secretary for Benefits. While the overall level of satisfaction in the country had declined slightly (but not significantly) from 56.5 to 55.7 percent somewhat or very satisfied, only one station exhibited a significant increase over the 1999 to 2000 period. The Togus RO not only had the highest satisfaction rate in the country at 63.9 percent, but had gained over seven percentage points over the previous year’s figure of 56.6 percent. The Togus RO also had many other significant increases in performance during the 1999 to 2000 period. The most dramatic increase was in the percentage of respondents who thought the amount of time waiting for a claim decision was very or somewhat reasonable. This increased from 46 percent in 1999 to 62 percent in 2000. Another increase was in the percentage of respondents who were kept completely or mostly informed of their claim status, increasing from 42 percent to 56 percent over the 1999-2000 period.

The 1999 Employee Satisfaction Survey showed similar results. Almost nine in ten (86 percent) of Togus employees were either very or somewhat satisfied with their job, compared with 59 percent of VBA employees nationwide. In addition, employee responses indicated that aspects of teamwork were rated higher in Togus than comparable figures in VBA as a whole.

Togus also scored well on traditional performance measures. The average days to complete rating-related

actions were 103.7 days in Togus, compared with 166.1 days nationally for FYTD data as of January 2001. Non-rating actions were also completed in about half the time in Togus when compared with the national figure (27.0 days vs. 47.9 days). Another measure, the appeals ratio, was significantly lower in Togus than for the country (3.0 vs. 8.5 appeals per 100 decisions). Indeed, Togus had one of the lowest rates in the country on this measure, which clearly improves customer satisfaction and results in less “downstream” work on the part of VBA and BVA.

The Plan

Did all of this happen by chance, or was it a result of a concentrated effort on the part of Togus employees and management? It didn’t take us long to find out that Togus had embarked on a systematic improvement plan several years earlier that was now starting to pay off. The improvement plan began when it became clear that the station was not as productive as it might have been, largely because employees didn’t have clear management expectations for production standards. Both management and employees met to identify the major barriers to productivity, and then began to work together to systematically address and solve the underlying problems. While looking at productivity issues, both managers and employees realized that these could not be addressed in a vacuum—leadership, quality, customer service, and employee engagement had to be addressed simultaneously. In the long run, working “harder” couldn’t substitute for working “smarter.” It also became clear that all stake-holders had to work as partners to get the best results.

The Principle

While the desire for increased productivity served as the catalyst for the improvement process, it wasn’t all-encompassing enough to serve as a guiding principle for the ongoing improvement efforts. Over time, and in many different applications, the guiding principle began to emerge. Its power lay in its simplicity—we are *all* here to serve the veteran. One interpretation of this principle is “grant when you can” and “give the veteran the benefit of the doubt.” In practical terms it means that the Acting Veterans Service Center Manager began to review all decisions to determine inconsistencies and to identify training needs. Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) received immediate feedback when inconsistencies or errors were discovered. Rather than allowing each RVSR to decide how strictly or leniently to interpret the law, specific guidance was provided. As decisions became more consistent and defensible, VSOs became partners with VBA decision makers in refining and pre-

senting the decision to the veteran. This process started to bring about a cultural change in both the RVSRs and the VSOs, moving from the old school of encouraging appeals if they didn't like the local decision to one of doing it right, and giving the veteran the benefit of the doubt, the first time. This resulted in an actual increase in fairness of the decision (if defined as consistency), and perceived fairness of VA's evaluation of the claim by the veteran (from 53.3 percent in 1999 to 57.4 in 2000). Not surprisingly, this approach also led to a higher grant rate (56 percent in 1999 vs. 64 percent in 2000) but fewer appeals, less than 3 per hundred for the 12 month period preceding and including January 2001. Fewer appeals would translate into reduced rework in the future, resulting in increased productivity.

This is only one example of many where the solution to a problem (increase productivity) turned out to hinge on a larger principle, "the veteran comes first."

Methodology

This case study is based on a variety of informational sources, some quantitative and some qualitative. As stated above, the C&P customer satisfaction and employee survey results as well as timeliness and appeals performance measures were the first indication that Togus had made significant improvements in these areas. However, the data alone could not explain *how* these improvements came about, or whether some of these actions might be adapted for use in other regional offices.

With this end in mind, we worked with the Togus RO staff to set up several focus groups and structured interviews at the station to help us understand and document the noted improvements. In August of 2001, we spent several days at the station, conducting two focus groups (one with employees and one with local veterans), interviewing the Director and Assistant Director of the station, the Service Center Manager, and several of the National Veterans Service Officers in a group session. We also toured the regional office and the adjacent Medical Center, and attended an all-employee monthly meeting. Upon returning to Washington DC, we listened to the focus group tapes and reviewed and compared our notes to prepare this case study.

Aside from the value of this narrative, we have also used this information to begin designing a VBA Performance Model. This model will quantify how the various aspects of leadership, communication, employee engagement, rewards and recognition, and teamwork affect employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and efficient use of resources, resulting in higher productivity. Working with an outside contractor, Caliber Associates, we are hoping to show that a sustained effort in the right direction can accomplish more than nonintegrated efforts which change more rapidly. Much as a good pool player does instinctively, the model would tell us the best way to get the highest scores with the least effort, by describing how all the individual parts affect each other.

To better understand the relationship between the role of management, employees, VSOs, and the effect of these improvement efforts on veterans themselves, the following sections give more detail on our findings thus far.

The Role of Leadership in Process Improvement

The leadership at the Togus Regional Office has worked very hard to foster an atmosphere of openness and respect among employees over the last few years. This is readily apparent upon examination of both the survey data as well as the findings from our interviews and focus groups. Several areas have had an especially strong impact on employee satisfaction and performance.

First, employees stated both in the survey and focus groups that management provides them with the resources they need to get their jobs done. The percent of employee respondents who reported that managers provide sufficient resources to promote improvement throughout the organization went from 49 percent to 80 percent from 1997 to 1999. This is clearly seen throughout the office. The leadership has provided the employees with new computers, ergonomic office furniture as well as an open office floor plan that is conducive to teamwork. They have also appointed a training coordinator to meet the training demands of the employees. If employees feel deficient in a certain area, they can let the coordinator know and he will schedule the necessary training. All of this results in a workforce that feels much more capable of handling the demands of serving veterans.

Another positive change in the Togus regional office is the system of rewards and recognition for employees. A much greater percentage of employees responding to the survey in 1999 (65 percent) stated that they were rewarded for providing high quality products and services to customers than in 1997 (36 percent). "Kudos" emails are sent out regularly to the entire office in order to commend certain employees for going above and beyond their normal duties, and there is an "employee of the month" program in which employees can nominate their co-workers for the award. One of the focus group participants summed up the atmosphere by saying that there is always a "pat on the back" — the leadership is not backward in its praise of employees who perform well by any means. This clearly helps keep employee morale high even in the face of the significant backlog that they are currently working through.

One of the most talked about improvements in the focus group and interviews is the communication among the various levels of the organization. The survey data also show that it has improved greatly since 1997, with 83 percent of employee respondents stating they were kept informed on issues affecting their jobs in 1999 versus 60 percent in 1997. In addition to regular monthly all-employee meetings in which any topic can be brought up for discussion, emails are also regularly sent out to update employees on workload issues and changes in regulations. The employees participating in the focus group stated that the abundance of information relayed to them gives the

feeling that management is not trying to hide issues from them or keep any secrets. Management also encourages employees to come to them with any problems or concerns so that they can be worked out quickly before resentment and mistrust develops.

A spirit of teamwork and cooperation between the leadership and employees is fostered from the very beginning, when the assistant director meets with every new employee for a full-day orientation. This orientation makes the work expectations clear, and gives the new employee a sense of their place in the Togus "family". It also lets the employee know that management is approachable. It is apparent from both the focus group and the interviews that management is very open to employee suggestions. Also, 71 percent of the survey respondents in 1999 stated that managers follow up on employee suggestions for improvements, versus only 45 percent in 1997. They have also clearly made an effort to reduce the number of management levels in order to make the office less hierarchical, as a full 60 percent agreed with that statement on the survey in 1999 compared to only 27 percent in 1997.

The Role of Employees in Process Improvement

As influential as the Togus leadership has been in improving the office's performance, the changes still could not have occurred without the help of employees who have internalized the concept that "the veteran comes first." The Togus employees truly believe in their mission, and it is obvious that they are very proud of their service to veterans. This helps explain how they achieved the highest overall veteran satisfaction percentage of any regional office in the 2000 C&P Survey. During the focus group, many employees spoke about how important teamwork is within the office. There are no egos that get in the way of people working together; for example, the newer employees feel completely comfortable approaching the more experienced employees for answers to their questions. Employee longevity is a crucial factor in the success of this office, the employees with years of experience provide an extensive knowledge base for the new employees and thus helps to save time in processing and also reduce errors. Also, the percentage of employee respondents who agreed that employees in different units participate in cross-functional teams to accomplish certain objectives increased from 50 percent in 1997 to 73 percent in 1999. Information flows freely between teams and other groups; in fact, there are meetings every Wednesday for the VSRs in which they can discuss any important issues. They also take advantage of their co-location with the VA Medical Center by working together to deal with shared challenges such as maintaining an accurate veteran database.

Employees also are working harder to facilitate better communication with the veterans. They call the veteran for information whenever possible rather than delay the process by sending out a letter and waiting so many days for a response. It is also evident that they treat the veterans

with respect. For example, the employees stated that they make it a practice to always be honest with veterans, they do not give them the runaround if they cannot answer a question, they just offer to find out the answer and call the veteran back. This is reflected in the significant increase in the percentage of veterans stating that they were treated with courtesy, compassion, and respect in the 2000 C&P survey (77 percent) versus 1999 (70 percent).

Overall, the positive attitude and dedication of the employees, even under the increased workload, is very impressive. This is confirmed in the dramatic increase in job satisfaction of the employees from 1997 to 1999.

Partnering with the Veteran Service Organizations

During an informal focus group that was conducted with the VSOs that represented the Togus Regional Office, two main themes kept coming up during the discussion: communication between the VSO representatives and the RO staff, and teamwork to achieve the common goal of helping the veteran.

The VSOs stated that the concept of the VSOs working together with the RO staff began about five years ago. The RO director brought everyone together and told them that they needed to work with each other, not against each other. Before that time, VSOs were not allowed to talk directly with the RO staff, they were "off limits," and were viewed as "the enemy." Since then, the relationship between the VSOs and the RO staff has steadily improved and is no longer adversarial. The VSOs believe that communication is the key to their success. They stated that there are "no attitudes, because everyone is on an even playing field," and that everyone seems to like each other.

In terms of teamwork, the VSOs stated that they help the RO by doing a lot of the development work. They walk the veteran through the process and try to get all of the information they can up front, so that the RO staff's time is not wasted. They have helped reduce appeals by helping to make veterans' expectations more realistic, and by doing a good job of preventing frivolous claims. They try to get veterans motivated by telling them they need to do all they can to help prove their claim, and not to expect the VA to do it all for them. They also spend time trying to educate the veteran's family, not just the veteran.

Overall, the VSOs are very impressed with the level of communication they have with the RO staff. They did however indicate that they were just recently limited to talking only to the team leaders. They were told that it was too distracting to RO staff to deal with these inquiries while trying to rate claims. The VSOs are very proud of their jobs and it gives them a great feeling to help people. They believe that there are not a lot of office politics in Togus, and that people really respect each other.

"One Veteran at A Time"

The leadership of the Togus RO had long worked under the assumption that if they did quality work in a timely manner, their claimants would be appreciative. When they

began getting feedback from customer surveys, they were quite surprised. Not only were overall satisfaction scores lower than they expected, but the narrative comments provided by the respondents were predominantly negative. RO management quickly recognized the need for improvement, and met with employees to determine what could be done to improve the perception veterans had of them. They all agreed to work towards convincing veterans/customers that the VA was sincere about providing quality work and timely service “one veteran at a time.”

Some of the steps taken toward implementing improvement include having the Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) take extra steps to assure that conversations with veterans were ended by asking, “Have I answered all your questions and addressed all your concerns?” By asking this question, the staff made a sincere effort to assure the veteran that they had adequate time to spend with them, thus taking an overall pro-active approach in communicating with veterans. Management’s role in facilitating improvement has been to make veterans aware (through town meetings or other outreach efforts) of the importance of how they perceive the RO staff, and to solicit their input on how the RO can better meet their needs.

The collaborative efforts of both management and RO staff helped them achieve significant results in the 2000 C&P Customer Satisfaction Survey. The Togus RO improved their overall customer satisfaction score by a larger margin than any other regional office. The percent of veterans who thought the amount of time spent waiting for a claim decision was either very or somewhat reasonable, increased from 46 percent in 1999 to 62 percent in 2000. In addition, the percent of veterans who were given a realistic estimate of the time it would take to process a claim increased from 60 percent in 1999 to 74 percent in 2000.

While the results of survey showed significant improvement, we still wanted to talk directly with veterans and see what drove these improvements. We conducted a veteran focus group at the Togus Regional Office in order to learn more about veterans’ perception of the quality of service provided to them during the compensation and pension process.

Most of the veterans in the group received help from a VSO. Their perception was that the VSOs were on their side and that the VA wasn’t. Veterans seemed to rely greatly on the VSOs to manage their cases and they were very satisfied with the help they received. They indicated that VA was working better with the VSOs, but that all the VA’s work was “behind the scenes,” and thereby ended up making the VSOs look good.

Many veterans stated that they received the most help with understanding the claims process from the Veterans Service Organization (VSOs) – not much help came from actual VA employees. The veterans indicated that VA employees were not responsive enough, but also indicated that understaffing is a problem. With the exception of a

“few bad apples,” they felt that most employees were courteous.

Veterans were aware that a VA team was assigned to their case, but they felt as though they were never able to talk to them. Veterans also stated that they were very informed throughout the claims process, but that VA employees didn’t inform them of the status of their claim. They suggested that they should be given the names of the team members and that the VA should provide personalized letters with more information. One veteran stated that you have to have connections to keep informed, and that knowing the right people to contact is key. The veterans indicated that the backlog problem may be infringing on the level of communication they receive from VA employees.

When addressing the issues that either pleased or displeased them during the claims process at the Togus RO, veterans stated that the claims process had improved, but that the VA still needed to keep up improvements. The overall consensus among the veterans regarding suggestions for improvement was that the Togus RO needed to hire more people. They stated that “99 percent of the people there were super, but that they were understaffed.” They wanted improved communication and personalized correspondence. They also felt that Togus should rely less on the VSOs to do their jobs for them.

Summary

It would be easy to attribute the success of the Togus Regional Office to the fact that it is a small office, which can compete successfully in a local economy with employees who come equipped with an exceptional work ethic. While this is undoubtedly true, it is not a sufficient explanation for the demonstrated performance improvement *within* Togus over the 1999 to 2000 period.

What lessons can be learned from this case study which might be applicable to other offices?

Initially, the most important factor is that the leadership of an office must *see* the need for change, *believe* that they can change the usual ways of doing business, and *sustain* the allocation of sufficient resources toward the effort. The ability to defer instant gratification (immediate improved results) also seems to be an integral factor, as improvements of this depth and magnitude do not happen quickly. Perhaps the historical commitment to veterans in Togus, and the “can-do” New England attitude helped this process along, but it could likely take hold elsewhere with inspired leadership.

Clearly leadership is key, particularly in defining those values that will guide the actions at all levels of the organization. Communicating these values and rewarding the concrete manifestations of these principles in the day-to-day operations of the office are essential to success. Conversely, actions which call these values into question, need to be openly discouraged, not simply ignored.

Partnerships are also essential, with the understanding that everyone who has a stake in the outcome, has something to

offer in improving how the process works. Partnerships between management and employees, employees and the VSOs, and VA/VSOs and veterans, combine to provide seamless service to veterans and their families.

Unlike the “talk” about serving veterans that is so ubiquitous, the Togus regional Office has shown, through independent performance measures, that they actually “walk the talk.” They can demonstrate their commitment to the VBA Vision in tangible, verifiable ways. These words become more than futuristic yearnings; they are reflected in the actual deeds and actions of the office. For Togus, their version of the VBA “vision” might read as follows:

Our mission is that the veterans whom we serve feel that our nation has kept its commitment to them; employees feel that they are both recognized for their contribution and are part of something larger than themselves; and taxpayers feel that we've met the responsibilities they've entrusted to us. Courage, honesty, trust, respect, open communication, and accountability are reflected in our day to day behavior.

While each office would find their unique path toward process improvement, the most important components of the process seem to be quite basic but equally difficult to achieve. The summary lesson is that if we are to move from “talking the talk” to “walking the talk,” principled, sustained leadership at all levels is essential.

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**Togus Case Study:
Background Statistics on Recent Improvements**

Employee satisfaction improvements – Statistically significant improvements in the percent who agreed or strongly agreed with survey items below from 1997 to 1999:

Survey Items by Dimension	1997 percent	1999 percent
Rewards/Recognition		
<i>Employees are rewarded for providing high quality products and services to customers</i>	36	65
Innovation		
<i>Risk-taking is encouraged without fear of punishment for mistakes</i>	39	63
<i>Supervisors/team leaders are receptive to change</i>	53	77
<i>Employees are provided with training when new technologies and tools are introduced</i>	64	85
<i>New practices and ways of doing business are encouraged</i>	59	86
Customer Orientation		
<i>There are service goals aimed at meeting customer expectations</i>	75	95
<i>Customers are informed about the process for seeking assistance, commenting, and/or complaining about products and services</i>	80	97
<i>There are well-defined systems for linking customer feedback and complaints to employees who can act on this information</i>	34	70
Leadership and Quality		
<i>Managers communicate the organization's mission, vision, and values</i>	66	89
<i>Managers provide sufficient resources (for example, time, training, dollars) to promote improvement throughout the organization</i>	49	80
<i>Managers let employees know how their work contributes to the organization's mission and goals</i>	40	63
<i>Managers follow up on employee suggestions for improvements in products, services, and work processes</i>	45	71
Communication		
<i>Employees are kept informed on issues affecting their jobs</i>	60	83
<i>Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization</i>	69	92
<i>Managers keep employees informed about the organization's conditions and operations, as well as the choices it faces (for example, budget cuts, downsizing, reorganizations)</i>	48	75
<i>There is communication among the various levels of the organization</i>	42	73
Employee Involvement		
<i>Employees are involved in improving the quality of products, services, and work processes</i>	75	88
<i>Employees have a feeling of personal empowerment and ownership of work processes</i>	44	66

<i>Managers provide an environment that supports employee involvement, contributions and teamwork</i>	50	77
Use of Resources		
<i>An effort is made to minimize the number of management levels (i.e. organizational hierarchy)</i>	27	60
Work and Family/Personal Life		
<i>Employees balance their work and family/personal life responsibilities</i>	65	88
Teamwork		
<i>Employees are rewarded for working together in teams (for example, performance ratings, cash awards, certificates, public recognition)</i>	20	75
<i>Employees in different work units participate in cross-functional teams to accomplish work objectives</i>	50	73
Strategic Planning		
<i>Short- and long-term quality improvement goals are established and integrated into the organization's overall strategic planning and budgeting processes</i>	48	73
Performance Measures		
<i>Quality assurance systems focus on the prevention of problems rather than on the correction of problems</i>	29	68
<i>Information collected from customers is integrated with other key data and used to improve the quality of products and services</i>	44	77
Personal Experiences		
<i>Gave a good or very good rating for the organization in providing job security for people like themselves</i>	31	74
<i>Rated their office as above average or one of the best compared to other organizations</i>	36	60
Job Satisfaction (Very or somewhat satisfied with...)		
<i>Information received from management on what's going on in the organization</i>	42	69
<i>Your opportunity to get a better job in the organization</i>	31	60
<i>Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?</i>	56	86
<i>Considering everything, how would you rate your overall satisfaction in the organization at the present time?</i>	44	77

Customer satisfaction improvements – Statistically significant improvements in the survey items below from 1999 to 2000:

Survey Items	1999 percent	2000 percent
<i>Percent who thought the amount of time spent waiting for a claim decision was very or somewhat reasonable</i>	46	62
<i>Percent who had a claim granted (of those who knew the status of their claim)</i>	56	64
<i>Percent who received help with their claim from a state or county VSO</i>	31	39
<i>Percent who thought they were kept completely or mostly informed of the status of their claim</i>	42	56
<i>Percent who were given a realistic estimate of time it would take to process a claim (of those who were given an estimate)</i>	60	74
<i>Percent who were very or somewhat satisfied with the handling of claim</i>	57	64
<i>Percent who did not contact VA more than once about the same problem or question</i>	55	65
<i>Percent who said the claims process reflected the courtesy, compassion and respect due to a United States veteran</i>	70	77
<i>Percent who said the appeal process was clearly explained</i>	73	81
<i>Percent who did not contact VA to discuss the claim decision letter after receiving it</i>	67	79
<i>Average amount of time a veteran spent waiting for VA to respond to mail correspondence (days)</i>	30.0	23.2
<i>Average number of times a veteran visited a federal VA office</i>	3.6	2.8
<i>Average number of times a veteran contacted VA by phone</i>	4.0	3.2

FYTD January 2001 Performance Data

	National	Togus RO
<i>Days to complete (rating related actions)</i>	166.1	103.7
<i>Days to complete (non-rating related actions)</i>	49.0	27.0
<i>Appeals per 100 decisions</i>	8.5	3.0