

Gold Medal Standard

Going rapidly from 300 employees to an organization including 1,400 workers, 25,000 volunteers, along with a full contingent of sponsors and contractors, required an HR leader for the Vancouver Olympics organizing committee to focus on embedding culture and values. The experience she believes will leave a lasting legacy for all involved.

By Scott Westcott

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By any measure, Erin Sills faces an Olympian HR challenge -- to guide the Vancouver Organizing Committee "through the complete organizational life cycle in five years, from start-up to complete dissolution -- all while the world watches."

With the Olympic torch soon to blaze on Friday, Sills took a few moments to reflect on the lessons she learned as director of workforce and engagement and communications for the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympics and Paralympics Winter Games.

Specifically, Sills is responsible for leadership and culture development, change management, team effectiveness and internal communications for an organization that comprises nearly 1,400 paid employees and 25,000 volunteers, along with a full contingent of sponsors and contractors.

But there were just 300 employees when Sills, a Vancouver native who has a background in organizational development and communications, landed the VANOC position in 2006.

She was tasked with "how to embed value and culture as the organization [went] through an intense and rapid growth phase."

Throughout 2009, the organization hired about 40 people per month as it geared up for the Games to begin.

"In a normal organization, hiring at that rate it may be difficult to maintain the culture," Sills says. "We really focused on hiring for the cultural fit and then let that culture manifest through our people. We hired leaders that consistently act and behave in ways that embody that culture and the values."

The values of the organization in many ways mirror those of the Olympics -- a focus on excellence, fair play, respect for others, a commitment to full effort and an understanding that participants are working for the larger purpose of the Olympic Games.

She focused on building a values-based, team-oriented culture in which new hires could quickly acclimate.

"We look to hire people with those values who are able to jump in with both feet," Sills says. "We have a mind-set that we expect that they are ready and capable of delivering on a portfolio of talent right away."

To do that, Sills relied on assessment tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior to help her colleagues understand and respect different personality types, to assess strengths and to build stronger teams.

The top leaders were assessed using Myers-Briggs "as a lens to see how they were interacting with teams and developing a greater understanding of what muscles they need to flex. It was really a snapshot of how they are showing up as leaders."

Key to a successful effort was getting buy-in from the leaders, she says.

It was necessary that the participants understood that there were no "right or wrong results" to the assessments. Rather, she says, the results were a tool to determine ways the leaders could fully leverage their individual strengths so the team could function better.

"They got a better picture of how their style and personality impact the organization in helpful and non-helpful ways," Sills says. "Myers-Briggs is a good starting point to determine what parts of yourself you need to develop to be as effective as possible."

With the organizing committee needing to accomplish so much in a relatively short period of time, Sills says, she made sure HR added value to the organization -- instead of adding bureaucracy.

"We didn't want HR to be a bottleneck," Sills says. "We wanted it to be a catalyst and help facilitate getting things done. It was super important that we didn't get stuck in policy and procedures. That meant listening to the leaders and discovering ways we could help deliver results."

VANOC will start winding down shortly after the Olympics are over, with an end date set for late March. Knowing the organization has an expiration date has focused leaders on creating a culture that will remain with employees, she says.

"A philosophy we hold is that we are doing this for a larger purpose -- to put on the best possible Games for Canada and the world," Sills says. "The people we are working with now will continue to contribute in so many ways at other organizations."

"We always keep in mind our legacy impact. People working with us have developed an incredible amount of resilience and the ability to work through massive change. It will serve them well in the future."

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