AMBULANCE NEW BRUNSWICK

In search of effective labour relations

Students from 22 universities in Quebec and the rest of Canada came to match wits at the 23rd Excalibur Tournament on March 20 and 21, 2009. The seven finalist teams were required to analyze Ambulance New Brunswick, an actual business case. The case was also analyzed by a professor after the Tournament.

BACKGROUND

Ambulance New Brunswick (ANB) is a public company created by the Government of New Brunswick in June 2007 to operate a standardized, province-wide emergency medical service.

Situation before ANB

- Emergency medical services in New Brunswick were delivered through dozens of separate contractors. There were for-profit operators, non-profit operators (including provincial government systems managed by Regional Health Authorities), municipal ambulance services, and First Nations ambulance services. A private sector company provided air ambulance services. Some operations were subject to collective agreements and some were not.
- There was no centralized dispatch. Three regional centres in the province received emergency calls and dispatched ambulances. There was no accepted standard for response times.
- Thirty-five different medical directors set patient care protocols, resulting in different standards of patient care.
- Paramedic training differed greatly.
- Many ambulance operators provided on-call service during non-peak hours. At these times, paramedics had to be called into work when calls were received.

Goals of ANB

- Unify all ambulance services under a single body;
- Create an improved, standardized response time for the province. The target is 90% compliance with a 9-minute response time in urban areas and 90% compliance with a 22-minute response time in rural areas;
- Elevate training standards for all paramedics until 100% are trained as Primary Care Paramedics. Introduce Advanced Care Paramedics at a later date;
Improve consistency of care through a centralized approach to emergency care protocols;

Have 24-hour on-site schedules, eliminating on-call systems.

ANB Responsibilities
The province expects ANB to:

- Operate land ambulance services, including patient transfers within and outside the province;
- Deliver air ambulance service, including patient transfers within and outside the province;
- Operate the Medical Communications Management Centre (MCMC) – a province-wide medical emergency communications and dispatch centre;
- Develop and maintain continual quality improvement processes;
- Acquire and maintain assets required to operate the ambulance service;
- Develop, test, and update the provincial disaster response plan for ambulance services, including an MCMC disaster and business continuity plan and emergency operations centre;
- Respond to customer, media and public inquiries and complaints and manage community and stakeholder relations;
- Work with related departments, organizations and agencies, including medical first responders (e.g. fire services) and 911.

ANB bought required assets (stations, trucks) from former operators following negotiations for the transfer of responsibilities to ANB.

Employees of the former operators who were not already public servants were offered employment with ANB, and became public servants.

The management company – NB EMS
Following a public tender, the province selected Medavie Blue Cross to develop the plan for ANB and to operate the provincial ambulance service. Medavie Blue Cross established a wholly-owned subsidiary, New Brunswick Emergency Medical Services Inc. (NB EMS) for this purpose. The province negotiated a ten-year performance-based contract with NB EMS to manage Ambulance New Brunswick and its personnel.

NB EMS employs the managers within ANB. The NB EMS managers act as agents of the province to manage ANB’s public service employees.

Organization of NB EMS
Collective bargaining structure
The approximately 900 employees of Ambulance New Brunswick consist of 850 paramedics, 40 dispatchers and 15 nurses.

Since the employees who were previously employed within the Regional Health Authorities remained provincial government employees, little changed when ANB was formed.

The paramedics and dispatchers formerly employed by other operators were integrated into the CUPE local when they joined ANB. They were credited with seniority based on continuous service with their previous employer.

The New Brunswick Nurses’ Union represents the 15 nurses, who are all associated with the air ambulance service.

A province-wide local of CUPE represents the paramedics and MCMC personnel.

Collective bargaining relationships
ANB personnel are covered by collective agreements written to cover the entire health system of the province – Regional Health Authorities plus ANB. The agreements’ focus remains hospital operations, and ANB is scarcely mentioned.

NB EMS places fewer demands on the province for HR support than the Regional Health Authorities did, but must still work with the Provincial Department of Human Resources for job classification and for legal support in the arbitration of grievances.

Management’s pre-ANB experience affects early approaches to labour relations:

- In the Regional Health Authorities, human resources management was reactive, and many HR affairs such as classification and labour relations were controlled closely by the province’s Department of Human Resources. The labour relations climate between the RHAs and CUPE was mildly adversarial. The focus for management was always on hospital operations, and paramedicine was something of an afterthought. Former RHA managers came to believe that the union’s view of issues would prevail over management’s.
The Department of Health had little direct responsibility for labour relations matters. Any internal departmental issues were directed to the provincial Department of Human Resources. ANB managers who were formerly government employees also came to believe that the union’s view of issues would prevail over management’s.

**Context of your mandate**

The NB EMS management team has done an outstanding job at putting together a functioning, highly professional, state-of-the-art service in a year.

During the first year, they hired more than 100 new paramedics, most of the flight nurses, dozens of dispatchers, upgraded the ambulance fleet, created new maintenance standards, developed new standard operating procedures, transferred and equipped more than 800 employees, negotiated for the takeover of services from 39 contractors with more than 50 contracts, assisted in the negotiation of a new collective agreement, and established a central office and MCMC.

But with the huge workload, NB EMS senior managers have not been able to work on a strategic human resources plan. They have not been blind to this need; they have simply been unable to find the time.

Employee relations are hampered by the nature of the business. The MCMC and air ambulance employees are mainly based in Moncton, but other employees are scattered across New Brunswick. There are more than 60 stations, and for most of the day paramedics are on the road in their vehicles. Employee communications and personal leadership are difficult. Front-line managers have a heavy burden of administrative tasks, such as scheduling paramedics. It is easy to revert to management by email.

Assume that the following symptoms have begun to emerge, reflecting the organization’s difficulty to date in giving HR the priority that management knows it must have in the future:

- There are concerns over the level of engagement by paramedics. It is obvious that there are pockets of front-line staff who have not bought into the new system. Paramedics are not generally motivated by career progression, since they have fairly limited opportunities to move up in their organizations. However, they take intense pride in their skills, abilities and technology, and are critical of anything that may take away from their public image. They sometimes express uncertainty about the new system.
- Managers are reverting to their former employers’ business styles and there is a danger of multiple disconnected cultures emerging.
- Managers who were previously private operators acutely feel their lack of freedom now that they are in a larger organization. They can no longer just buy a new truck when they want to. They can’t have their own administrative assistants. They have to adapt to new and different standard procedures. In many cases they were non-union and now they have to comply with a collective agreement.
- Many managers who were public servants believe that “nothing can be done” about many HR issues, because their former managers often did not deal with labour relations issues effectively. They believe the union is able to “win” any time they take a stand.
- The employee experience differs across the organization, based on differing management styles among the Operations Managers or Regional Managers. Some are described as blunt and black-and-white about issues, while others are more like friends. Some hold information meetings with staff and others do not. In some cases, policies are discussed and in some, they are issued.
- In a number of cases, HR has learned about serious issues too late to have an influence. Front-line managers have already taken a position. HR has sometimes had to modify the manager’s position at a later date. As a result, there has begun to be some friction between HR and Operations.
- Tensions exist between dispatch and paramedics. While this is a common state of affairs in emergency services, it is undesirable and may be growing.

**Your mandate**

1. After identifying the main issues and challenges, outline a concrete two-year plan for NB EMS to
   i) create a unified and positive ANB culture and
   ii) improve labour relations. Your plan will describe specific actions, expected outcomes, and timelines.

2. Recommend three things that NB EMS can do to instil confidence in the new emergency medical services system, especially among paramedics.
When an emergency arises in the province, there’s no time for indecision. Healthcare workers, nurses, paramedics and dispatchers all need to be committed to a unified and positive culture and be able to operate in a good working environment.

Before Ambulance New Brunswick (ANB) was created in 2007, the province’s ambulance services were delivered through various organizations and contractors, some of which were subject to collective agreements and some of which were not. These organizations were merged to form a single medical emergency service whose entire workforce is covered by the same collective agreement, negotiated in different units. The New Brunswick Emergency Medical Services (NB EMS) is now responsible for developing ANB’s plan and operating the province’s ambulance services. NB EMS was awarded this contract in order to improve efficiency and response times, elevate staff training standards and harmonize and improve the consistency of care.

ANB is a public sector corporation that has recently hired 100 new employees, who are also unionized. However, despite excellent management and the successful harmonization of each procedure, the company hasn’t yet had the time to draft a strategic human resources plan. This is ANB’s main problem.

There are four problematic issues that need to be resolved. The first is the lack of commitment of the company’s critical mass of employees, i.e. the paramedics. The second is management style, which should be founded on the same values and goals organization-wide. Furthermore, and this is the third challenge, poor communication has led to tensions between HR and managers as well as between dispatchers and paramedics. The fourth issue is labour relations.

Action plan – Year 1

It is crucial to develop an HR plan and to align it with the company’s goals. The plan should include a communication plan and an employee engagement plan. In the communication plan management will have to identify the information it should communicate to employees, in particular the company’s mission, vision and values, in order to boost their level of commitment. This plan would remedy the lack of communication between the different departments and, more specifically, between the various professions.

From another perspective, not only do employees have to buy into the company’s mission and values, the organization also needs to adopt a uniform management style that recognizes the workers’ union affiliations. Their cooperation is therefore essential and it is in this respect that the union must be considered a major player.

During this first year, the company should also introduce an effective work organization plan. Since ANB delivers emergency care services, it’s very important to ensure that team members work well together when they have to intervene in a situation and that the dispatchers who receive the emergency calls clearly convey the information to the paramedics.

Who are the intermediaries in this situation? They are the front-line managers who formerly managed small care units. They should be trained to liaise between the calls, the care staff and the paramedics.

Lastly, a climate of trust should be built by establishing a partnership with the union and applying a win-win strategy.

Strategic plan – Year 2

The second year of the strategic plan will first focus on the plan to encourage employees to buy into the chosen values. Practices should also be aligned with the company’s goals and business plan. The proposed recommendations will simultaneously improve the organization’s culture and its labour relations.

The next step will be for ANB to develop communication tools, including an intranet. A database could be created where employees could check their work schedules, thus reducing front-line managers’ workload. These communications tools will enable ANB to expand the scope of its message and support all its practices.

In the second year, ANB will also have to follow up on the actions and outcomes of Year 1. In this way, it can evaluate which practices worked well and which need more fine tuning.


**EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

Obviously, an understanding of the organization’s strategic objectives is one of the expected outcomes of the HR plan. The goal is to achieve a common understanding among all the company’s major stakeholders, i.e. front-line managers, members of the three employee categories and of course the union.

Another expected outcome is greater trust between the departments and between the employees, which will improve labour relations and the work climate.

Cooperation among the employees, which is beginning to be problematic, as well as a positive and proactive organizational culture are other goals to be targeted.

**TRAINING**

The second recommendation is to provide training, initially to the senior executives since some of them aren’t used to working with unionized employees. This type of situation calls for knowledge, as well as common understanding of the collective agreement, labour relations and ways to improve them.

Next, the company could make coaching available to the 100 new employees to smooth their integration into the organization.

Finally, ANB should ensure its employees’ development. The paramedics are proud of their training and of what they can accomplish. To be motivated, they need to be involved, considered and allowed to develop to improve their performance.

**TImeline**

During the first six months, it will be extremely important to implement the strategic human resources plan, formalizing at least the key points, including the company’s mission, visions, values, as well as the employee engagement and communication plans.

The communication plan should be a two-way street; senior management should be able to present its strategic objectives, mission, vision and values, while the employees should be able to talk about their problems to the managers, who could help them find solutions.

The plan to boost employee commitment should be implemented over the longer term, i.e. over the next two years. We can’t expect employees to become motivated about their work overnight. We have to give them reasons why and ways for them to do so. What’s more, employee engagement should also improve interdepartmental cooperation.

**Recommendations**

**Focus groups**

The first recommendation is to set up focus groups. The problem between the two departments, i.e. the dispatchers and paramedics, is that relations are becoming adversarial. Representatives from each group should meet to identify the areas of conflict and discuss the solutions each has to offer.

There’s also some friction between managers and HR. This situation needs to be clarified because management’s objectives are conveyed through HR and front-line managers are responsible for overseeing the achievement of these goals. Accordingly, the company should make sure that these managers clearly understand and are committed to these objectives. They also need to trust management to be able to deliver the information to employees. Meetings (which could be weekly at first) could be held to help harmonize the management styles of the four directors and sixteen operations managers.

**Gradual use of communication tools**

Employees must be able to communicate with each other. A first step in this direction will be to set up an intranet. Since the managers already have a heavy workload, it’s hard for them to manage scheduling as well. A system should thus be developed that would reduce employees’ uncertainty about their schedules, and an intranet is an ideal tool in this respect.

Secondly, ANB works with the Medical Communications Management Centre (MCMC), a province-wide medical emergency communications and dispatch organization. Together with the Centre, collaborative initiatives and tools should be designed to improve call management and create a priority-based call screening system.

**Innovation**

When the company is less impacted by the recession, it could consider an innovative but slightly more expensive option. It is already being used by the City of Montreal police department and has considerably improved employee engagement. All workers were given a multimedia telephone (such as an iPhone or Blackberry) so they could access their emails and the intranet. It would be a good idea to implement this policy at ANB both to motivate employees and to promote communication.

**The Budget**

ANB employs some 850 paramedics, which represent a payroll of about $36 million. The budget for the proposed recommendations is around 0.5% to 1% of this amount, i.e. between $180,000 and $360,000. Since this is a fairly substantial sum in a period of recession, the company could use only part of it at first to introduce communications and engagement practices and set up an intranet. ANB could later allocate more financial resources to improving the work environment.
The creation of Ambulance New Brunswick (ANB) out of a large number of previously separate emergency services providers poses numerous technical, leadership and human resources issues sharing a central theme: the need for integration and cohesion.

W
dile ANB’s managing organization, New Brunswick Emergency Medical Services (NB EMS), has performed admirably in creating a functional, technically advanced service in one year, attention must now be focused on a variety of structural and cultural issues within the organization.

To start, a comprehensive human resources strategy and managerial approach must be developed and communicated to managers in order to bring a sense of common direction and method to a management team that is fragmented and uncertain about their roles. Strategic consultation and planning is also necessary to clarify and strengthen the relationship between Human Resources and Operations management as well as to promote a more consistent, positive approach to union-management relations. Particular attention needs to be paid to the status and engagement of the paramedics who are directly responsible for the delivery of emergency medical services. The two unions (CUPE and the New Brunswick Nurse’s Union) must be actively engaged in seeking more collaborative relationships with an explicit focus on the ANB and the possible establishment of separate bargaining units for ANB employees. All of this needs to be pursued within a context of managerial fragmentation resulting from the previous system of emergency services delivery and “mildly adversarial” union-management relations.

To ensure integration and cohesion...

THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE
Over the next two years, the NB EMS Executive Team must provide consistent, sustained leadership that reinforces the overall mission of ANB and seeks to unify the culture of disparate units within the organization. This will require senior leaders to be visible and available to interact with regional managers and bargaining unit employees. Of course, the Executive must first clarify its own intentions and goals in the form of a strategic human resources plan that covers staffing, training and development and union-management relations. The Executive team must be prepared to focus on developing this plan within the next quarter and then to expend considerable time and energy in bringing managers and staff into alignment with the mission and values of ANB and the terms of the strategic human resources plan over the next several years.

Though resources are limited, a parallel effort might be undertaken to communicate the vision for ANB outward to the public in ways that will also help unify the internal culture and cultivate a sense of pride in the work of the organization. The contributions of the various occupational groups – particularly the paramedics – should be highlighted in both the external and internal communications initiatives. As well, the Executive needs to acknowledge the degree of change taking place in the organization and how ANB differs from what existed before. These efforts to shape the external and internal views of ANB are not events, but a process that must be sustained for at least the next year.

THE ROLE OF NB EMS MANAGERS
Line management needs considerable support and training to become a more unified group within the organization. In consultation with the Regional Operations Managers, Human Resources must develop a plan to establish uniform expectations of the Operations Managers and a set of core values and managerial behaviours seen as best supporting the ANB’s strategic plan.

Then, a training program should be developed and delivered to the Operations Managers in groups drawn from all four regions to foster system-wide consistency. These training sessions should be both instructional and interactive, with ample opportunity for managers to air questions and concerns. Attention should also be paid to clarifying the role of Human Resources and encouraging a pro-active approach to managing employees.
and union relations rather than the previous reactive approach. Among other things, the training should address the defeatist attitude of some managers (“nothing can be done because the union always wins”) by ensuring that managers understand their rights under the collective agreement and are prepared to act accordingly, while respecting the role of the union. Questions and issues raised in these sessions should be recorded and responses fed back to all participants, establishing a set of “frequently asked questions and answers,” available to all managers on the ANB intranet and supplemented as new questions arise. The manager training program should be developed and delivered within the next two to three quarters. Follow-up sessions with different regional mixes of Operations Managers should be provided one year later.

**THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCES**

The Human Resources team must be prepared to play a coordinating and consultative role with Regional and Operations Managers, as well as within the Executive Team. During the first two years, the Human Resources Director and regional generalists will also need to be visible and available to the line managers and actively solicit their needs and challenges in managing the new system. While developing and delivering (perhaps with the services of external facilitators) the manager training program, Human Resources should also identify specific substantive and skill needs of managers. Shorter, topic-specific workshops could then be provided for the managers as generalized needs are identified. All of the training programs should also be viewed as opportunities to continue reinforcing the strategic direction and mission and values of ANB.

Among these values will be the desire for a more collaborative and pro-active relationship with the unions. Achieving this is also a process rather than an event. Both the CEO and Human Resources should initiate ongoing dialogue with the unions’ leadership that is both as informative as possible for the unions and solicitous of their views and issues.

Human Resources should also take the lead in investigating the potential for an application to the New Brunswick Labour & Employment Board for variance of the bargaining units at ANB under the *Industrial Relations Act*. The submission would be that

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…

the ANB paramedics, dispatchers and nurses share communities of interest distinctive from the province-wide bargaining units they are presently embedded within and should therefore have separate bargaining units. While the unions and some employees may be wary that this is a management “divide and conquer” tactic, efforts must be made to explain the benefits to all of being able to bargain with respect to the specific needs and working conditions of these occupational groups within ANB. Though this initiative should be launched within the next quarter, it is a process that will likely take a year or more but will hopefully be concluded before the next round of collective bargaining. ■

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