



Mutual vision and positive union/management distribution operations for success

If you were to visit the Defense Distribution Depot Norfolk, Va. a few years back, then return today, you would notice many significant differences. The organization is much leaner in legacy infrastructure due to Base Realignment and Closure footprint reductions and much larger in business as a result of workload transfers from the U.S. Navy in the areas of Material Processing Center, warehousing, and Intermodal Hub operations. However, one aspect of DDNV is strikingly different, and it centers on its strong organizational climate which is anchored by one of the best labor/management partnerships.

In 2007, just as United States Navy Supply Corps Capt. Brad Bellis took the reins at DDNV, the command was faced with strained relations under a virtually non-existent labor/management partnership. Employee grievances and unfair labor practices were seemingly the norm, and the level of tension that existed between the unions and management was high.

Bellis understood the vital connection between strong labor/management partnerships and an organization's ability to effectively and efficiently achieve its mission, and did not hesitate to take action to reverse the trend.

Early in 2008, after analyzing the state of affairs at DDNV, Bellis developed a comprehensive

roadmap to move the command forward, with the first step calling for formal mediation between DDNV management and union leadership within the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the American Federation of Government Employees. The message: It was time to resolve today's issues today, put the past in the past, and move forward with a mutual vision.

With the successful conclusion of the mediation, the DDNV workforce could already sense and see the changes. The atmosphere at DDNV soon became one of teamwork, with everyone feeling free to contribute effort and ideas. Where they were once a rare occurrence, labor/management partnership meetings became a frequent exchange of valuable ideas designed to motivate employees, improve command climate, and achieve exceptional depot performance. For managers and supervisors, Bellis also executed a training program that educated his leadership team on ways to build stronger relations and harness the synergies that had lain dormant between the parties for so many years.

The result has been an extraordinary partnership that fosters active listening and empathy, with a mutual ability to compromise. Most rewarding was the fact that management and labor soon found themselves working together to develop new programs

and policies that would take DDNV to the next level of positive employee relations. Examples included a totally revamped awards and recognition program that delivers new levels of equity and evenhandedness to employees for exceeding the standards, new tools to enhance empowerment at the lowest levels, and a passionate but firm approach to dealing with disciplinary issues.

Bellis also influenced his leadership team to adopt what he calls the PH Factor approach. PH stands for Politeness and Humbleness. In his experience, Bellis has noticed that supervisors and managers who are outgoing in the manner by which they exhibit these traits tend to garner greater respect and performance from their employees. "You can boil down the PH Factor into one word – respect - such that when one shows a genuine level greater than what they expect in return, huge dividends can materialize. In my view, the modest leader is a respected leader, and deference can certainly make a difference", says Bellis.

Both the IAM&AW Local 97, led by Chairman Nate Edmonds and Co-Chairman Albert Hawkins, along with the AFGE Council 169 Vice President for the Eastern Region Rita Lemon, convey that the era under Bellis and deputy commander Denise Cordeiro has been pleasant and supportive of forward movement of all aspects of labor relations.

Both IAM&AW and AFGE

labor relations position Norfolk

unions emphasize that DDNV senior leadership has displayed unparalleled levels of fairness and integrity with a keen ability to follow through in what they say they will do, rather than just talking the talk.

An open door policy exists and ensures that any concern that advances through the chain of command can be resolved face to face with the commander himself, if needed.

Under Bellis and the union leadership of IAM&AW and AFGE, DDNV has promoted the importance and value added by the use of mediation and advocates its use whenever possible.

Over the past two years, DDNV has been able to resolve all issues at the lowest levels without the need for engagement by the Federal Labor Relations Authority through successful mediation. Additionally, participation

in mediation has been used as a training tool for new supervisors, providing valuable hands-on experience when dealing with labor issues.

Another unique aspect of the DDNV partnership is senior management's desire to include the unions on operational discussions and decisions. "Strategic operations is not an area required of negotiation under the union agreements," Bellis stated. "Nonetheless, for management not to tap into over 70 years of experience, with much of it being operational among the union leaders, would be a miscalculation on our part."

Bellis has found it advantageous

to roll in union leadership early in the process when discussing operational changes, under the premise of informal discussions, prior to submitting a formal proposal. "In doing so, we gain a better vantage point from a labor/management perspective so that when we develop the formal proposal, most if not all of our mutual concerns are already addressed, which greatly streamlines the bargaining process," said Bellis.

Though labor/management relations at DDNV have had many growing pains over the years, the command is now at the forefront of the most productive relations in its 18-year history. "The formula is quite simple," Bellis continues.

"When I took command, I looked in the eyes of our workforce and committed to the following: 'It is your job to take care of the customer. It is my job to take care of you.'" According to the unions, Bellis has clearly lived up to that promise.



Defense Distribution Depot Norfolk, Va., leadership, commander United States Navy Capt. Brad Bellis, center, and deputy commander Denise Cordeiro, far left, take pride in the strong partnership between management and the unions at DDNV.