

Case One: ElectriGov

ElectriGov is a government agency whose mission is to supply electric power to various locations in the United States. To accomplish this task, the organization has three line crews of five to ten men whose job it is to install high-voltage power lines. Each crew is highly cohesive, led by a foreman. Moreover, crew members have worked together for many years and have an established pattern for doing their work and solving problems. The work is hard, dirty, and dangerous. Almost all of the men have had a friend who has been seriously injured or killed while on the job.

The crews typically work independently, but when there are large projects to complete, they must work together. This can create serious conflicts, since the crews often don't agree with each other's approaches to organizing and managing a particular job, and none of the three foremen wants to be subservient to the others. Thus when line crews do large projects together, they tend to compete with one another rather than cooperate. On

one project, the conflict became so nasty that one crew failed to inform another crew that the wires were hot at a certain section of the project. This serious safety breach was reported to senior management, who immediately launched an investigation. We, as consultants, were initially asked to serve as part of the team investigating the causes of the safety violations.

After the initial investigation, we were asked by ElectriGov's senior management to "clean up the conflicts" between the crews. The approach we used to help the crews reduce their conflicts was a variation on design A. All three crews were brought together in one room, and the need for an interteam development program was discussed. Each crew was asked to commit to solving the conflicts between themselves and the other crews and to agree to give the program a chance. Once we had their agreement, each crew was then asked to meet separately to list their perceptions of the other crews and the specific problems that they had in working with the others. After meeting separately, the teams came back together and each reported its perceptions of the other crews.

In our consulting role, we facilitated the discussion, making sure that each crew's perceptions were made clear and that each crew described the problematic behaviors of the other crews in concrete, specific terms. As a ground rule, crews were asked to be descriptive and to avoid using emotionally laden language when critiquing the other crews. After each crew presented its perceptions, the other crews could ask questions to clarify points, but the crews were not allowed to debate the validity of the other crews' perceptions.

After each crew aired its views, the crews, together in an open session, were then asked to come up with recommendations to improve the relationships. Their suggestions were listed on large poster boards in the room. The crews discussed how they might do more advanced planning on the larger projects to determine who would do what and who would be in charge of the project. They also considered rotating crew members to

improve relationships between crews. Most important, the crews agreed on a common goal: avoiding accidents at all cost.

At the end of this interteam-building session, each crew made a public commitment to change its behavior and implement the recommendations. As a result of this intervention, the crews now have a new approach to working with each other on large projects that minimizes the conflicts that they had in the past.