

Section 10.

RFW at the Indianapolis RO

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On Friday, September 26, we finished our visit to the VBA Regional Office at Indianapolis.¹ The headlines in USA TODAY that morning said “Contrite IRS pledges reforms.” After several days of testimony on Capitol Hill, the head of the Internal Revenue Service apologized for the agency’s failures and announced new steps to curb IRS abuse of taxpayers. Neither the truth of the malpractice or its prevalence had been established, nor was the sincerity of the apology known, nor the action to be taken. Given that almost every citizen feels pinched by federal taxes, for a moment it was a *cause célèbre*. It also was clear that it was a media event.

In the same building, the Minton-Capehart Federal Building, with the VBA Regional Office was the Internal Revenue Service District Office plus an IRS disclosure office and a walk-in service. There, federal workers, civil servants, ordinary people, indistinguishable to us from people who run plants, mall stores and schools in central Indiana. They were Hoosiers, not bureaucrats. They knew as little about the practices described on Capitol Hill as the average newspaper reader. On his radio talk show that afternoon, Sean Kelly continued an attack on federalism, claiming that the only thing that the U.S. Government had ever managed efficiently was the G. I. Bill.

Upstairs on the third floor of the federal building, we inquired about federal services to Indiana veterans. The workers there were aware that from time to time the Veterans

¹ Because Indianapolis was but two hours drive from the CIRCE office at the University of Illinois, we were able to turn the visit to the Indianapolis Regional Office into several visits, beginning on September 12, returning September 23 and again on the 25th and 26th. For each, there was one site-visitor, Robert Stake. He observed work in offices and at desks, met with division heads, interviewed administrators and six letter writers, and gathered data from files and performance tests. The visit was facilitated by Lisa Goebel, management analyst, with time and generous consideration given also by the director and many staff members.

Benefit Administration was said to be writing incomprehensible letters. They knew from experience that over the years, many letters had been bad, filled with legal jargon and bureaucratic syntax. Furthermore, they knew that they were part of a political context. But when they discussed their work, they spoke consistently without reference to the media, Congressional oversight, or what the public thought of them. There was a world of veterans, many of whom they had talked to on the phone, a world that included loan agencies, hospitals, and colleges. They referred often to the Central Office in Washington, but in organizational terms, not political. They seemed to have no thought that they were the same as the IRS people described in USA TODAY.

The Station. The VBA Regional Office in Indianapolis provided services for disability compensation, pensions, vocational rehabilitation, and backing for home loans. Educational and insurance benefits were handled at St. Louis and Cleveland, respectively. As the division names imply, these services are quite different, and specialized within, so that the responsibilities of different workers ranged greatly from room to room across the station. Staff size was about 145, down from a high of 200 three years earlier. Loan Guaranty currently had 30 positions; Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling, 11. What had been the largest group had become larger, with 81 positions, as Compensation and Pension merged with Veterans Services. C & P was where adjudicators and rating specialists acted upon claims for support due to physical disability resulting from military service. The reorganization brought with it the expectation that more personal communication practices, via telephone and face-to-face counseling, would reduce the heavy load of adjudication letter-writing (although paper trails would not disappear). The local work in Loan Guaranty was changing as Indianapolis became the national center for a portfolio loan program. Down-sizing (called "right-sizing" by some) meant not only a diminution of time available to handle a claim but an increase in claims handled at a national rather than regional center.

The director of the Regional Office was Dennis Wyant, heading the office since mid-1994 after many years in the Central Office where he had been national Director of Vocational Rehabilitation and Counseling. Wyant held a

doctorate in Education and was a certified rehabilitation counselor. Despite being legally blind, Wyant kept an eye personally on what was happening around the station. He was a "people person," a "problem-solver," neither confrontative nor authoritarian. He heard well what his chiefs and assistants had to say about running the programs. He expressed strong support of RFW as a step in the improvement of services to veterans.

Claims for benefits are made by veterans filling out forms. Most veterans have made contact with one of the service organizations, the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, for example, and many first encounter VBA with a form already filled in. Some requests are taken by telephone or over the counter, but quickly forms become the currency. Some forms are supplemented with records from doctors or campus admissions offices or county offices and such. The evidence is reviewed and a reply prepared. For a disability compensation claim, an adjudicator will recognize which on the menu of computer letters should be called up, and by using Microsoft Word and PCGL (Personal Computer Generated Letters) and by filling in blanks, modifying language, and attaching forms and pamphlets, compose a reply to the claimant.

A quality assurance review annually examines a sample of cases from the compensation and pension files, 106 were selected for 1996, of which 90 were reviewed by a federal team. Attention is given to the appropriateness of findings and not to the appropriateness of the communication. At Indianapolis, for a while different divisions were conducting their own quality assurance operations but reports are no longer required and the practice has waned.

RFW Training. On September 24, 1996, Wyant wrote to his division chiefs informing them of the Reader Focused Writing schedule as follows:

We are nearing our scheduled time for Indianapolis to receive RFW training. Each RFW Tools Course consists of seven sessions, approximately three hours each of core instruction and a 2-3 hour follow-up approximately 6-8 weeks following the class. The three hours per day includes two hours of broadcast instruction plus one hour of

class exercises and practice. . . Since we have eight keypads, we can train eight during the morning and eight during the afternoon.

At least two employees from each division will become a trainer to help with station and division training. We want to include decision makers with the first few broadcasts and get off to a good start. . . . Division Chiefs should schedule three from Adjudication; two from Loan Guaranty; two from Veterans Services; and one from Vocational Rehabilitation for broadcasts beginning October 16 morning/afternoon and October 28 morning/evening.

Such lengthy all-staff training had not happened previously at the station. Opposition to the plan among the chiefs and among the workers was considerable, voiced as putting too much strain on the workload, but also with skepticism that this professional development workshop, "as always before," one trainee said, would be more than consciousness-raising about the problem. It also was recognized that, for most of the participants, letter-writing to veterans was not a large part of their job description. But opposition melted with realization of the generality of the communication principles and the appeal of the new composition techniques, warmed also by opportunity to work on interesting tasks with staffers from other divisions and by the high quality of the broadcasts. In retrospect, essentially all participants considered the training relevant, practice-changing, and personally upgrading.

For two hours a day in a corner of the station's large conference room, the eight participants for each session watched--via satellite screen--Melodee Mercer, a insurance specialist in Philadelphia and member of the VBA communications task force coaching the RFW and interacting on touch pads. "On page 48 of your manual, in the letter from Timothy Morrell, what implied questions can you identify? Your light is on, Frank at Detroit, what questions are implied in his letter?" The touch pad communication failed often, but ordinary phones were substituted. The third hour was used for group activities. The exercises were well developed, thought-provoking, especially in that they gave the specialists opportunity to see how co-workers in other divisions resolved content problems. No further broadcasts were scheduled and even the expected follow-up sessions disappeared.

Obstacles to Implementation. One of the primary findings from our fieldwork is that there was not a close match between the training and the actual work at Regional Offices. It has already been mentioned that the work is diverse and specialized, yet the training was the same for all participants. When most returned to their desks, the work piled up there offered little opportunity to try out RFW. Most letters follow PCGL formats, some of which were composed parallel to that of RFW or have been modified along those lines. The information the adjudicator enters into the form provides little opportunity for really composing a letter, so only those for which no PCGL letter exists challenge the worker to compose a letter along RFW lines. There was no effort being made at Indianapolis to develop pattern letters or PCGL paragraphs better suited to RFW. Most letters authored by a worker were kept in their own files but seldom reached someone else's. When we asked about the desirability of having a clearing house of unusual letters, the most common response was that the borrowed letter would still have to be carefully studied, and the workload probably would not be served.

According to Wyatt, the main obstacle to adopting Reader Focused Writing was the lack of support from those sections of the Central Office not directly developing it. For example, the following letter was sent to an Indiana veteran over the signature of the Under Secretary for Benefits.

I am writing to let you know that the regulations pertaining to service connection for herbicide exposure have been revised. This change may qualify certain Vietnam Era veterans for disability compensation.

On the basis of the March 14, 1996, National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine's report, "Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 1996", which provides information concerning the health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam during the Vietnam Era, Secretary Brown authorized the expansion of the current list of conditions that are presumed to be related to military service. Now veterans who served in Vietnam may qualify for compensation for prostate cancer and acute

and subacute peripheral neuropathy based on exposure to herbicides. These two conditions will be added to the current list of conditions that we presume are the result of exposure to herbicides which includes chloracne or other acneform diseases; Hodgkin's disease; multiple myeloma; non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; porphyria cutanea tarda; cancer of the lung, bronchus, larynx or trachea; and soft-tissue sarcoma.

Your name is listed on our Agent Orange Registry. We have identified you from this list as someone who might be eligible for service-connected compensation and health-care services for a condition we recognize is the result of exposure to herbicides used in Vietnam. I urge you to contact the nearest VA regional office as soon as possible to file a claim. Also, you may telephone for assistance and additional information by dialing our toll-free telephone number 1-800-827-1000.

The point here is not that the Undersecretary's letter might misjudge that veteran's ability to handle technical language but that the staffers at the Regional Office who see and circulate this letter, and many others from the office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs quickly recognize that the letter does not adhere to the principles and formatting of Reader Focused Writing. At least some of them thought, "If it's not important for the Undersecretary to use RFW, it won't affect my job if I don't either."

The director of training for the office, now in private practice, was more blunt about the obstacles to changing communication methods on station. He said,

I recognized that without absolute support from upper management, RFW training could not be successful. Both the station director and the Central Office need to monitor the training effort, to require its numerical record, to perceive that engagement in training is an essential aspect of a healthy organization. The tallies, the reports are essential. How many hours, how many certificates, in what ways is the training being used? I designed the report form used by various Regional Offices. But it did not mean anything because we knew that seldom was the boss paying

attention. The report looked good. It could be used for lip service. But it had no teeth.

The “higher ups” were looking at “indicators of production.” Production outweighed everything else. People taking RFW courses were well aware that there was a competition between RFW and production. RFW went nowhere. It was frustrating. The newspapers were talking production. Secretary Brown was talking production. And production meant an emphasis on the present, not on the future. Much was changing but the emphasis was on the present.

Changes will not occur toward Reader Focused Writing until the Regional Director tells his Division Chiefs that they will be evaluated on how much the division staffs are involved in upgrading their skills. Or by saying that “every letter going out must be in RFW style; if not, it will be done over, and you are responsible for seeing that happens.” The staff will say, “But it is interfering with production.” Then if the director sticks to his word, the changes will happen, and I predict, production will be better. If the director backs down, then no changes will occur.

This presumes that ultimately the division chiefs will do what the director says. In our brief visit it appeared that the chiefs were at least as much inclined to do what their division heads at the Central Office were requiring. And it appeared that the Washington voices they heard were saying that participation in RFW training was acceptable but that changes in letter-writing were not to occur at the expense of caseload productivity. Were there a stand-off, the division head was expected to say, “There’s no way we can generate specially-styled original letters and keep up with the incoming mail.”

Trainee Views. Regional Office staff members who participated in VBA training in October, 1996,² were

² Although RFW training records indicated eight Indianapolis RO persons participated in each of four October sessions, we identified 40 persons there who had had the training. Three no longer worked there and eight did not turn in the follow-up survey administered eleven months after training. The

unanimous in considering quality of letter-writing to veterans an important issue and that writers should strive to orient more to the veteran's needs. All of the 29 but two said that the VBA approach made sense to them and all but three said that VBA was not making too much of a fuss about improving letter writing.

In the interviews as well as in the surveys, it was apparent that the staffers supported a continuing effort to improve letter-writing. An interviewee said,

It has been a long time since we have taken a hard look at letter writing and communication skills in general. The letters we used to use were confusing, legalistic. The Agency as a whole needed to provide the legal angle, and that still is the dominant attitude across the Agency. We were not able to advocate for the veteran, to gather information to advance his claim. RFW was the first time the Agency clearly provided a pro-veteran view. It was long overdue.

The survey asked what results had they seen from the training, with the following nine options available for multiple checking. The results were as follows:

14 checked: I have seen many examples of improved writing.

10 checked: Letters take longer to write; production is down.

5 checked: No improvement in output is apparent to me.

5 checked: Letters are simpler to read but complex topics are avoided.

5 checked: Headings and white space now are more important than content.

3 checked: The number of letters returned for re-writing has diminished.

2 checked: Staff members have set higher priorities on good writing.

1 checked: Supervisors are reporting that better letters are going out.

0 checked: A higher office moral can be partly attributed to RFW.

findings here are based on the 29 who did complete the ten-minute survey.

In interviews with six of these respondents, it was also apparent that they felt that the quality of letter writing had improved considerably in the last several years. When asked why, two or three said, "The main reason is that the standard computer letters that we draw from are much better than they were." Twenty-four indicated they had applied RFW ideas to their own work, four of those said "often."

We asked these 29 trainees what portion of their work time they presently spent writing letters to veterans. Nine of them indicated they did not do that at all and the median for the group was doing it only 5% of the time. Only three of them indicated that they spent half their time or more writing letters to veterans.

In two separate ways, we asked them the average amount of time in the last year spent on developing RFW skills. The median was 1-2 hours per month. Almost half of them had participated in earlier VBA efforts to improve letter writing. About a third of them had once had a formal writing-improvement course. When asked about the need for in-service training in general, the median of the group responses was that 4 hours a month should be set aside.

As to the training, 26 of the 29 checked that it was well organized. The same number said they learned much about better letter-writing. Just over half said the videos and materials were of high quality, five said low. About half of them said that the quality of the contribution of the on-site instructor was low.

As to implementation, 20 indicated that it was impractical to implement RFW in the ways illustrated in the course, apparently meaning that there were just very few occasions for start-from-scratch letter writing, and too little time to do it. When asked if the organization of the Regional Office had changed in any way to support RFW, 17 said "no" and another 11 said they didn't know. In follow-up, they assured us that the officers had clearly indicated their support for RFW letter writing but, as they saw it, the organization had not changed to make it happen, and most did not see ways that it should change.

When asked if simpler letters trying to deal with a complex situation sometimes steer the veteran wrong, chiefs

and workers alike said they could not identify cases of that happening. One added, "The complex information is in the attachments and we always tell them how to ask for more information."

One thing apparent in discussions at Indianapolis was a perceived mismatch between the training as designed and work methods and workload of the staff. The training apparently did not sufficiently acknowledge the diversity of communication responsibilities within VBA or sufficiently point to the generality of the RFW approach for communication in general. Two suggestions arising again and again were that in their own communications by letter, the Central Office should exemplify Reader Focused Writing and that the computer letters and the PCGL programs should be further upgraded along RFW lines.

The Image of Service. Even under careful probing, the staff of the Indianapolis Regional Office revealed a strong work ethic and a sincerity in being of service to veterans. But they also were careful to maintain what they believed was a good public image. They were highly aware of the low regard many citizens have for federal employees, and they themselves decried bureaucracy and political motive, for, in their own eyes, they were Hoosiers, not bureaucrats.

Still they could not overlook the fact that in Oklahoma City, a federal services building of vintage and set-aside like theirs, had been blown apart. When I asked why the empty slot on the directory where earlier the Director's Office had been identified (Room 397) and when I asked why a punch-code lock on the Door to the Director's suite, I was told they changed them when an angry veteran had threatened Rowland Christian, the Assistant Director. In an age when citizens daily watch television actors acting out their rage, these public servants know that violence can quickly come to them.

But they also know all but a few of the thousands they serve are reasonable men and women seeking only their entitlements. They are aware that the laws awarding those benefits are complex but are confident that their legal and technical people have appropriately categorized the conditions that establish and differentiate eligibilities. They take pride in their efforts to communicate and feel that

changes in rules and word processing in the last few years have made almost all of their letters comprehensible. They would like better form letters and even more training and work time to purge their letters of the remaining typographical errors, inconsistencies and obfuscations.

