

Section 12.

RFW at the Boise RO

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VARO Boise was little. Of course, size is relative.¹ Situated on an intersection of newly paved streets with a backdrop of a sky so blue it seemed fictional, the four-storied light-red brick building with broad dividers of cream concrete had housed, since 1993, the Boise VA Regional Office.² Forty-five employees, with a turnover rate of 4%, provided three main benefits services³ to the 112,150 veterans of Idaho. In a national climate of consolidation and change within VA, a sense of “small and vulnerable” was often expressed. Comments on performance and production often reflected awareness that positions and structure were not as stable as in years past. Changes in the past few years had altered the structure of the RO. The loan servicing responsibilities of the Loan Guaranty division had been transferred to Denver. The Veterans Service Division and Adjudication had merged in November of 1995 into the Veterans Service Center with the roles of Veterans Benefits Counselor and Veterans Claims Examiner becoming cross-trained into Veterans Claims Representatives. Operating in two teams, service and rating, the responsibilities of many of the employees of the Veterans Service Center had increased since cross-training.

What occupied their time was the daily business of serving veterans. Organized for the alternating responsibilities of answering phones and counseling walk-ins as well as letter writing, the Veterans Service Center’s service team filled most of the second floor. On the third floor, the Veterans Service Center’s rating team spent its days rating and responding to claims and appeals. Vocational Rehabilitation operated a

¹ The Boise office had been called little but tell that to my aching feet. After spending the day, mainly between the second and third floors, the VARO seemed to become larger with each passing hour.

² I thank Bob Secrist and Guy Sakamoto for their gracious facilitation of my visit. The director and many staff members generously supported my efforts to evaluate the RFW training at Boise.

³ The three benefits were Compensation & Pensions, Vocational Rehabilitation and Loan Guaranty. The RO also provided walk-in counseling and the toll-free assistance services.

satellite office on the second floor. Loan Guaranty and the Director's office occupied the fourth floor.⁴ The employees of the Boise RO had much to do in their efforts to meet the needs of the Idaho veterans.

Throughout my observations, their friendliness, their respect toward each other, toward veterans and toward me as a visitor, spoke powerfully of advantages their size provided. As Bob Secrist, leader of the service team, explained, "They have really come to know each other's strengths and weaknesses. They have learned to work well together." Service Center team members were 18 of the 20 people participating in the 1996 RFW training.

Overall Impression of RFW

At three time periods⁵ that fall, three different groups gathered seven times each for the satellite RFW course. Most of them had been with the VA over 20 years. Guy Sakamoto, Service Center Officer and head of the division, also participated in the course. Nineteen RFW-trained individuals remained at the RO in the Fall of 1997. Nine months earlier, 44% of the ROs staff members had participated in the course. In a small room with no windows, they had sat at new tables on new mauve carpet watching a satellite screen, interacting via the one-touch system and telephone with Melodee Mercer and folks at the other participating stations.

The leaders at Boise and 15 of the 18 trainees we surveyed reported that the course was well-organized. But only nine trainees indicated the quality of the RFW videos and materials was "high." One trainee told me she liked the hands-on activities of the class. A staff member from Loan Guaranty stated, "It was helpful to see what others do—how they emphasize things—how they distinguish what is important." A few trainees reported that "RFW helped good writers become better writers but the bad writers did not necessarily become good writers." A comment made by a few was, as one trainee said, that "for what we learned, it was too

⁴ The first floor, at "garden level," housed supporting departments such as finance, computers and the mail room.

⁵ The three courses occurred between September 30-October 9, October 16-24 and October 28-November 7.

long.” Sakamoto reflected, “being in a classroom, open to critique, for so long was difficult for some.” One person protested, “It wasn’t learner focused” and another complained that, in general, VA training, RFW included, was in the “one-size-fits-all” mentality.

Impact on RO Activities. Over half of the trainees I spoke with specifically mentioned that emphasis on customer focus was an important part of the class. My interviewees made many comments such as:

Communication with the veteran is the priority.

RFW was good in stressing the need to respond to veterans’ concerns.

People need to be more careful and apply the letter to the veteran when they write.

Maybe the manner of referring to the veteran as the priority existed before the RFW Tools course but it certainly was part of the culture during my visit.

The Director, Barry Barker, claimed the RFW training cut down on follow-up letters and reduced the number of calls for clarification. To RFW, he also attributed an increased recognition of the problems with VBA letters. He anticipated that the annual Customer Survey would reflect his intuitive sense of improvement in communication as a result of the training. Defining RFW as a way of “[producing] letters that consider veterans’ needs rather than our own needs,” he was positive about the program.

Three staff members explicitly said, “All it basically was was formatting.” However, Sakamoto indicated that the Boise staff had entered the course with the belief that RFW was just about formatting but “left with more.” When questioned, he described “more” to be: awareness of passive and active voice, the third person problem, and not to use jargon. He said that the intent of RFW was not just to produce a pretty letter, that the letter should be understood on first reading by the veteran.

One of the staff members said that if RFW training were to continue, it should emphasize the customer focus--because format is built into PCGL already. Sakamoto summarized this concern by stating,

The training was high in quality. I embrace training that can help them do their jobs better. If it is training, then that's positive to me. But then, in their "real life," they went back and found there was not a lot of the RFW technique they could use and apply. Most of the letters were already done. I question whether the RO is the place for the training. RFW should be training the CO staff writing the PCGL letters and paragraphs.

As Baker said, one of the principal justifications for changing the writing of the VBA was reduction of workload due to letters that were clear. One staff member I spoke with labeled this an "institutional myth." This staff member stated it was not the clarity of the letter that affected the veteran's response but whether the veteran was satisfied with the answer on their claim. In other words, the "work savings" argument failed with some trainees. And there is an appealing logic to their criticism. Can "bad news" be communicated in a way acceptable to the reader? If the message is written clearly enough, will the veteran turn to the appeal process rather than the phone or more written communication with the RO? And if the appeals process is invoked does the paperwork diminish or just change in nature? Of course if the emphasis really is on service to veterans, these questions are subordinated.

Is Simplicity Sought at the Expense of Complexity?

I explored the idea RFW might promote simplicity by avoiding complex topics. I asked several Boise staff members about this issue. Some of their answers reflected an important perspective on the communication efforts of a VBA Regional Office and the RFW training. One Veterans Claims Representative thought that "some things really are too complex" and then referred to changing manuals and the regulations within those manuals as an example of the complexity. Another staff member explained,

It depends on the writer. There is a potential to see RFW as just white spaces, separation of paragraphs and headings and not anything more. But you still need to explain the complexity. So to some extent RFW does emphasize “dumbing down.”

A Loan Guaranty staff member replied, “Some topics are so involved that one can [easily] leave stuff out. I want to answer their [veteran’s] questions and then be sure to refer them to you or the lender because there is so much that the veteran may give up during the process.” A Ratings Analyst responded to my question about this issue by stating,

To do a good job with it [RFW pattern paragraphs in PCGL], you need to alter every letter at least a little bit—letters are not perfect for each situation so you have to edit or add to every letter. They [CO] can’t make it [PCGL] “idiot-proof.”

The Director said, “Yes, there are topics that are too complex. The Service Organizations help a lot with explaining these topics.” A Veterans Claims Representative said that with “veterans who might be elderly or disabled, letters can’t be too simply put—although the problem may be complex.” Sakamoto, the Service Center Officer, changed my question by stating, “It’s not the complexity, it is the legality which prevents simplicity.” He acknowledged that

the issue, i.e., the medical condition, may be complex but the legal question is “is there a linkage, a connection, with service.” If none is found then the audience becomes both the lawyers and the veteran, and the quoting of regulations becomes part of the communication.

Overall, these communicators said some things cannot be put simply—either the format is too limiting (for effective, personalized communication) or the legality is too complex. On our survey, 11 trainees out of 18 selected “Letters are simpler to read but complex topics are avoided.” as response to the question, “What results have you see from the RFW training?” I was assuming that the effort would be to simplify complexities but at Boise the sense was that some topics are not simplified. They seemed to say that rather than putting the communication on complex topics simply, parts of the

letters remain complex. And, for them, rightly so. They said that simplification was a valuable goal but, when the audience of the correspondence included lawyers and those in legal arenas, some complexities must remain.

Communication or Production Standards

In the aisle against the wall was a rack with files. Hand-written with a bold marker, a sign above the files read, "6 months old!" A Veterans Claims Representative told me of the production pressure. Using the phrase, "the caseload is getting old," she explained the pressure of backlog was strongly felt by herself and colleagues. Another Veterans Claims Representative commented, "Productivity is the big drive. We are compared to other ROs." Relating productivity and RFW, an interviewee forcefully told me, "They can't have it both ways: [One way] It takes time to develop a letter, carefully considering the veteran's needs and [Second way] to meet 'timeliness' requirements. If they want better service, then they are going to have to take away timeliness."

Two reviews, one internal and one external, examined letter writing at the Boise Regional Office. The Statistical Analysis of Operations report summary on the quality of letter writing of August, 1997 recorded that, of the 49 letters reviewed, the "overall quality and content of letter writing continues to be quite good." The summary noted that "irregularities consisted of over-development rather than omitting necessary development." The SAO report noted the use of headings and white space as well as "reader friendliness" of the letters. According to this internal report, the force of comprehensibility appeared to be influencing the letter writing. Prior to RFW training, the VBA conducted a Customer Survey of the Veterans.⁶ The survey queried veterans on their satisfaction with the service of the VBA. Veteran opinion on correspondence was specifically reported, including issues of timeliness and comprehensibility. Fifty-eight percent of the veterans reported that they received most, almost all, or all the information needed when corresponding with the Boise VBA. Fifty-two percent of the veterans

⁶ Survey of Veterans' Satisfaction with the VA Compensation and Pension Claims Process, 1996 Results, Boise, Idaho Regional Office. VBA Office of Resource Management.

reported that they waited longer than they felt reasonable to receive a reply from the Boise VBA. The forces of production and comprehensibility existed in tension at Boise Regional Office. If the RFW training investment was viewed as an effort to improve communication but the pressure to continue or increase production, with a shrinking staff size, remained; then an increase in the tensions between the two forces was created.

Concluding Thoughts

RFW training involved almost half the total staff at Boise, about 75% of the Veterans Service Center. Their participation in the 1996 RFW Tools course was high. Generally supporting the RFW lessons, they spoke of the emphasis on customer focus and the importance of providing needed information to their veterans as important principles of RFW.

During my visit, they were also very clear on the barriers to implementing RFW tools in their daily work. The legal issues needing to be presented restricted simplification. The pressure to meet production requirements resisted efforts to spend more time on preparing a response for each veteran, according to several letter writers.

Throughout the visit, the Boise VBA staff members showed a keen interest in our evaluation. Their willingness to participate in interviews and the other activities of the evaluation study enabled me to explore issues in meaningful ways. Accustomed to more reserved personnel (from other studies), I found their interest and cooperation delightful.

As I left the blue skies and foothills of Boise, I pondered the changes happening at the RO. I wondered if the shifting of some of the loan responsibilities to Denver caused the Boise Loan Guaranty staff members to become more specialized with fewer responsibilities. I wondered if the merger of Veterans Service Division and Adjudication would encourage the staff members to become generalists. I thought about the continuation of RFW and other training and how the changes, the shifts towards becoming generalists or specialists, would affect the training. The type of training, in light of

“restructuring,” best suited for the new VBA deserves further thought from the VBA and the advocates of RFW.