



Now and Tomorrow
Excellence in Everything We Do



ANNUAL REPORT 2016–2017

OFFICE OF INFORMAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

I am very pleased to present the 8th Annual Report of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)'s Office of Informal Conflict Management (OICM).

As we have just celebrated the OICM's 10th anniversary, the goal of this report is to highlight the achievements and meticulous work of our passionate team, whose primary mission has remained unchanged from the outset: improving the workplace, one conversation at a time.

Over these past 10 years, demand for our services has grown. Today, more employees are knocking at our door to find solutions for themselves. They want to build their confidence in difficult situations and develop their skills so that they can respond to those situations promptly and tactfully. This is excellent news! *Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.* This saying summarizes exactly the OICM's philosophy.

The Office has always adapted to its clients' changing needs, and it will continue to do so. This is our strength, and it is what we are known for. Our clients appreciate the quality and diversity of our services. Our virtual training workshops, coaching programs for supervisors and rigorous processes for all our services are recognized and lauded by the Informal Conflict Management System (ICMS) community.

We rely on employees throughout the country, from Vancouver to Fredericton via Edmonton, Toronto, Edmundston and Gatineau. Our team is experienced and highly qualified. Technology is also part of our day-to-day work, and it helps us reach a larger number of employees quickly and at little cost.

In this report, you will find a wealth of information about our achievements during the year, our range of services for all ESDC employees, and what they think of their OICM.

Enjoy!

Albert Tshimanga

INFORMAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The Office of Informal Conflict Management offers alternative options to all Employment and Social Development Canada employees to help them prevent, manage and resolve conflicts in the workplace.

As its name indicates, informal conflict management is another way to address a conflict for those who would prefer not to go through formal grievance or complaint processes. It gives participants greater control over the processes in which they are involved. There are no deadlines or time constraints: participants begin and end the process when they are ready to do so. It helps them establish constructive and respectful dialogue, and listen empathically and sincerely to find long-lasting solutions that are acceptable to everyone. Regardless of the process chosen, an informal conflict management practitioner is there to provide participants with tools and support.

USE OF THE OICM'S SERVICES

NUMBER OF FILES

The OICM opened 525 files in 2016–2017 (*fig. 1*), 11% more than in the previous year. With this increase in files comes another substantial increase in the services provided by OICM practitioners (*fig. 2*).

Figure 1. Number of files opened: year-over-year comparisons

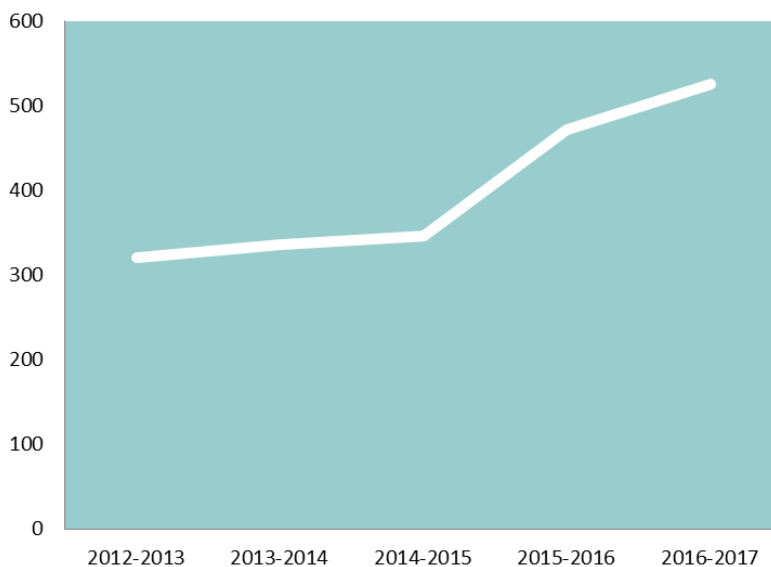
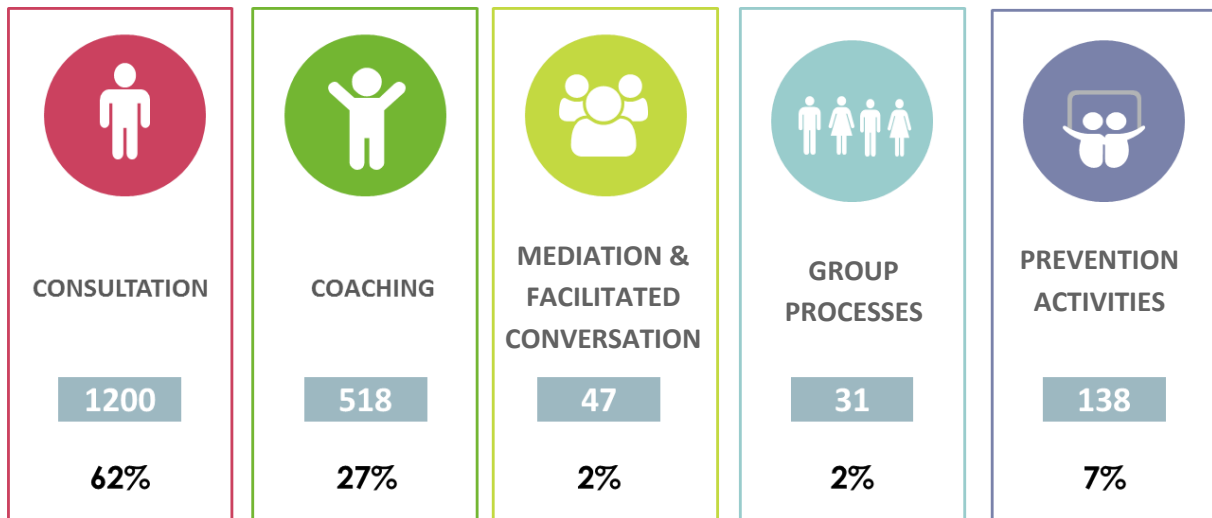


Figure 2: Number of services provided



CONSULTATION

Consultation is the first contact between the client and the practitioner, making it the most popular service at 62%. Scheduled at a time convenient for both parties, consultations give clients an opportunity to explain, by telephone or in person, the situation leading them to contact the OICM and to explore potential options with the practitioner’s assistance. For statistical purposes, consultations with clients, consultations with the parties involved, pre-mediation sessions and group process interviews are included in this category. This helps provide a more realistic picture of a practitioner’s work.

Notably, the number of consultations rose 42% over the previous year, returning to levels similar to what had been recorded prior to 2012–2013. One plausible hypothesis, which had been raised at the time, is that the decline observed between 2013 and 2016 coincided with the Deficit Reduction Action Plan and the major changes that followed. This trend had also been noted in other OICMs in the federal public service.



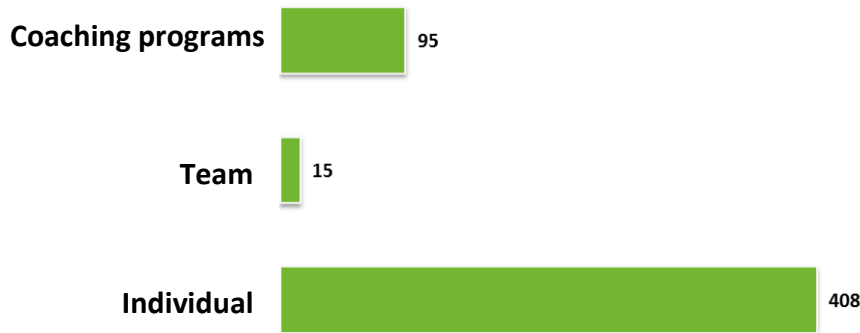
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COACHING

All OICM practitioners will tell you that the best way to boost your confidence and skills in conflict management is through coaching. Coaching promotes dialogue, which is the key to good relationships and a healthy working environment. People who participate in coaching have the opportunity to practice listening and asking open questions to find solutions to their conflicts under the supervision of a certified OICM coach.

In 2016–2017, the OICM delivered 518 coaching sessions, accounting for 27% of services provided (*fig. 2*). This service can be broken down into three categories (*fig. 3*): individual coaching, team coaching, and coaching as part of a mentorship or coaching program for supervisors. Individual coaching is done one-on-one while the two other

types focus on the sharing of ideas and experiences among colleagues. Management teams seeking to resolve an issue in a team will find that team coaching is ideal for them, as it will help them identify a consistent, collaborative approach in a very short time.

Figure 3. Breakdown of coaching sessions by category



Mediation / Facilitated conversation

With 47 sessions delivered, mediation / facilitated conversation accounts for 2% of all services provided at the OICM. Although these are the OICM's most well-known services, this figure is not surprising since mediation and facilitated conversation require significant personal investment from the parties. The practitioner works with each party at a deep level to help them identify their needs and interests, and thus supports the search for solutions that are acceptable to everyone during the mediation session.

This approach is also used in resolving grievances. It allows the employees and managers involved to restore lines of communication and address contentious issues in a constructive manner. Mediation processes will also sometimes bring to light other sources of conflict that are generally at the core of the grievance or complaint. If both parties come to a consensus, an agreement is reached and the grievance is withdrawn when all corrective measures have been implemented. Resolving a grievance quickly limits or even prevents the escalation of conflicts and reduces all human (anxiety, fatigue, fear) and monetary (sick leave, absenteeism, staff turnover) costs involved. For example, it is well accepted that a grievance may take months to be heard, whereas mediation is normally completed within 30 days. Between April 2016 and March 2017, the OICM processed 12 grievances through mediation, of which eight, or 67%, were subsequently withdrawn.



Group processes

Thirty-one teams were involved in group processes this year, a record high in the OICM's 10 years of operation. This number is particularly impressive given the time required to provide this service: it takes an average of 45 hours for a team of about 12 employees. There is also the fact that a practitioner will opt to use other processes,

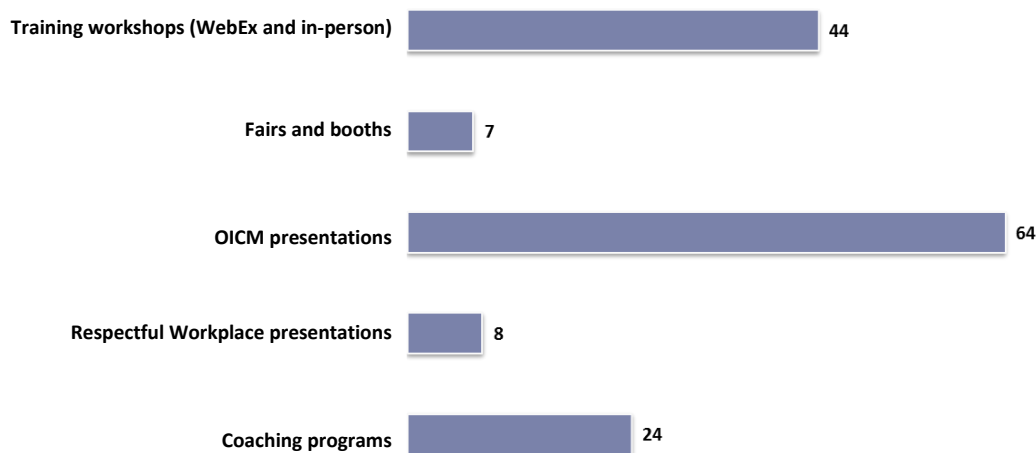
including mediation, individual coaching or management team coaching, before initiating a group process. A discussion with the manager will reveal that one or more employees are very often the source of conflict within a team. Therefore, it is important to address those issues before getting the larger group involved.



Prevention activities

For a number of years, the OICM has opted to put greater focus on prevention activities in order to equip employees and managers, help them resolve disputes themselves as soon as they arise in the workplace, and prevent the escalation of heated, costly conflict (*fig. 4*). This shift is in keeping with what our clients have asked us for: tools, tools and more tools!

Figure 4. Prevention activities



The tools provided for Department employees include virtual workshops accessible via WebEx. A total of 389 employees nationwide attended the 33 *Behaviours in Conflict Situations* and *Working with Resistance in our Relationships* workshops we delivered. These workshops focus on various mechanisms that make us react when dealing with others and ways to manage our reactions effectively.

The coaching programs for supervisors helped 136 supervisors at all levels (team leaders, managers, executives) speak openly with colleagues about difficult situations, focusing on three themes: conflict management, performance management and, newly, mental health. This allowed them to explore ways to resolve issues under the supervision of an OICM coach.

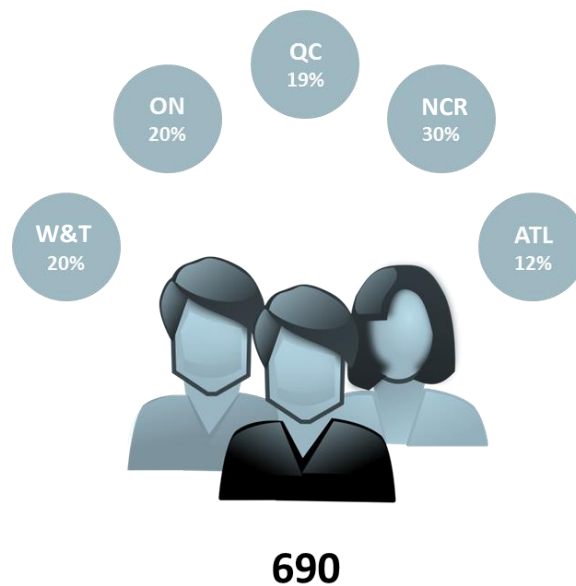
The OICM did not stop there. It also delivered other in-person workshops (11) and many presentations (64), in addition to participating in seven fairs to raise awareness of the Office's services. Just over 2,800 employees were educated about the services to which they are entitled under section 207 of the *Federal Public Sector Labour Relations Act (Informal conflict management system)*.

NUMBER OF USERS

The OICM served a total of 3,495 employees throughout the country in 2016–2017, an 11% year-over-year increase. Of that number, 690 opted for conflict resolution services to address specific conflict situations.

Among those who worked with a practitioner, 30% were from National Headquarters (Gatineau / Ottawa), 20% were from Ontario, 20% were from the Western and Territories Region, 19% were from Quebec and 12% were from the Atlantic Provinces. This year, for the first time, the services rendered per region were proportional to the percentage of employees in each region (*fig. 5*).

Figure 5. Breakdown of users of services rendered by region



ACHIEVEMENTS

Initiative to resolve grievances through mediation

Since 2010, various ESDC partners—unions, Labour Relations, management and the Office of Informal Conflict Management—have maintained long-lasting and productive cooperation to promote prompt conflict resolution in order to support the search for solutions that are acceptable to everyone and mitigate the sometimes devastating effects of long-term conflict on the individuals directly involved and their immediate professional and personal environments.

Throughout the years, multi-party working groups have piloted and implemented many initiatives. For example, the Human Resources Union Management Consultation Committee (HRUMCC) requested a review of the grievance process, as a result of which five recommendations were issued, including one to make an offer of mediation mandatory. The latter recommendation was not made official in the end, but two projects came close

to meeting that objective, offering mediation to the parties whose grievance had the potential to be resolved in mediation.

The first pilot project (v.01) took place between 2011 and 2013 and resulted in a grievance withdrawal rate of 81%, or 22 out of 27 grievances. The most recent project (v.02) was led exclusively in the Quebec Region, where a working group developed a process and met regularly to assess grievances and explore the possibility of resolving them through mediation. It is important to remember that the parties directly involved in the grievance (Parties A and B) always made the final decision as to whether or not mediation was used.

Between 2016 and 2017, the group members, which included two union representatives, two management members, one Labour Relations advisor and one OICM manager, assessed 16 grievances, seven of which went to mediation (*tables 1 and 2*). To date, four out of five grievances have been withdrawn, for an 80% success rate. Launched in August 2016, the project ended in May 2017 with the Quebec Region Executive Committee’s approval to make it an ongoing project.

Tables 1 and 2. Grievances assessed and received as part of pilot project v.02

Grievances selected for offers of mediation (10)		Offers of mediation accepted (7)	
Offers refused (by either party)	3	Process completed, grievance withdrawn	4
Offers accepted	7	Process completed, grievance not withdrawn	1
		Process under way	2

Cooperation with key partners

On May 30 and 31, 2016, representatives from the Office of Values and Ethics, Labour Relations, OICM, and Occupational Health and Safety met for two days to conduct a roundtable on what everyone is doing to identify new opportunities for cooperation and minimize the silo effect that employees may be experiencing. The meeting was successful and the participants agreed to meet again, once or twice a year.

The OICM has continued to facilitate the *Respectful Workplace* presentation alongside the Office of Values and Ethics, participating in eight presentations in person and by telephone.

Participants in ESDC’s Mentoring Program continue to benefit from the expertise of OICM coaches. Those who wish to do so may ask one of the coaches to participate in mentor-mentee meetings and share their observations. New mentors attended the workshop entitled, *the role of a coaching attitude in our communications*. Four OICM practitioners (coaches) received a 2017 Deputy Ministers’ Award for their involvement in the project.

Partnerships with other organizations

The OICM also provides small government agencies with 1,500 and fewer employees with informal conflict management and prevention services. Elections Canada, Public Safety Canada, Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions and Courts Administration Service employees benefitted from access to the OICM's services following agreements in principle. As of April 2017, service offerings were extended to three other organizations (the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission and the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada).

Trends report

The OICM also developed a *Trends Report* to share information that it gathers on the work environment as a result of its proximity to the employees. Published on a quarterly basis, this report sets out practitioners' observations on the challenges facing employees who come to see them and highlights potential issues that could affect the workplace. This report is intended as another tool available within the Department to take the pulse of the organization.

Mental health coaching program for supervisors

In recent years, mental health has taken its rightful place in public discourse. The Clerk of the Privy Council has also addressed this issue many times in the Annual Reports to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada. The facts are in about the connection between high-performing organizations and healthy workforces. It only made sense that the OICM contribute to the Department's efforts as well. And it did so by developing a new mental health coaching program for supervisors.

Over the course of five coaching sessions, participants discuss challenges surrounding mental health and how they relate to conflict in the workplace. They discuss how to promote a healthy work environment through conflict prevention and resolution, how to initiate dialogue with their employees and teams, and how to practice self-care.

The role of a coaching attitude in our communications workshop

Another program for managers that gained in popularity this year is the workshop entitled, *The role of a coaching attitude in our communications*. This workshop's content is covered in other coaching programs, but this time, the content is presented in a compact three-hour format. In addition, more participants can attend: the limit is 25 rather than 10, which is the norm in other coaching programs for supervisors. The goal of the workshop is to introduce the principles of a coaching attitude, which is based on four objectives: asking powerful questions, listening with empathy, providing feedback courageously, and daring to make bold requests.

The workshop was offered eight times during the year to various groups: managers, labour relations advisors and union representatives.

The positive feedback we received following these sessions convinced us to expand our regular offerings and include the workshop in our training calendar for 2018–2019.

Data management system

This year, the OICM gave itself a gift it had been wanting since its creation: an automated data management system to compile and generate useful data on the use of its services. With over 400 files open per year, months-long interventions involving full teams, neutral third party changes to deal with unforeseen circumstances, and statistics required in real time, a data management system was desperately needed. Of course, the system is accessible by OICM members only. It is the result of a major collaborative effort among the public service's ICMS offices, as the initial version was generously provided by the Treasury Board Secretariat's ICMS office and adapted by the OICM team to meet ESDC's specific needs.

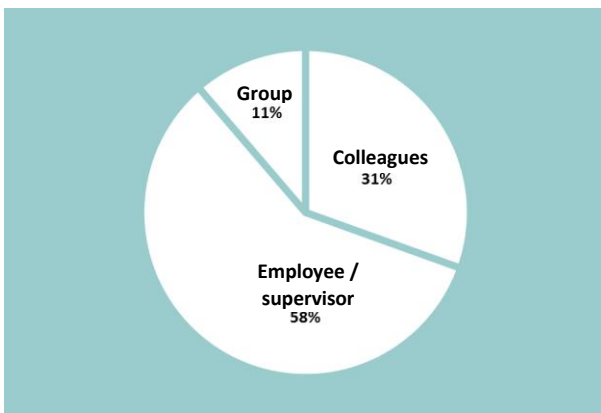
Intranet site and pamphlet review

In 2016, the OICM took advantage of its 10th anniversary celebrations to review (and dust off) two marketing tools: its intranet page and its pamphlet. This project was carried out in cooperation with the Department's communications team.

OBSERVATIONS

Most (58%) of the conflicts observed at the OICM are between direct line reports (*fig.6*). This has been the case since 2006 and is similar to what has been observed in the public service as a whole.¹ A number of hypotheses can help explain this finding: communication between the parties may be deficient, some people might have greater difficulty dealing with authority, and roles and responsibilities may be poorly defined or expectations unclear. Conflicts between colleagues account for 30% of files, while conflicts involving more than two people represent about 11% of files.

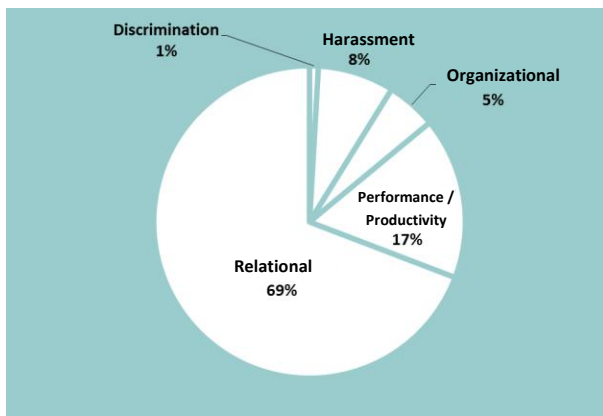
Figure 6. Relationships between the parties



¹ Federal ICMS Network Report 2014–2015 & 2015–2016, prepared by: Federal ICMS Network, Communication Pillar, September 8, 2017.

Another piece of information collected by the OICM has to do with the main reason why people decide to contact the Office. Not surprisingly, relational conflicts stemming from a misunderstanding of some aspect of the other party's persona (values, culture, history, experiences, personality) are the most common at ESDC (*fig. 7*), accounting for 69% of all files opened, followed by conflicts relating to performance or productivity, at 17%. Again, other ICMS offices in the public service have made the same observation.

Figure 7. Nature of the conflict



Another observation is related to an increase in request for OICM services as mentioned in this report. One could ask oneself as to the reason(s) for the increase. Several factors may have contributed towards an uptake in services:

- A sound partnership established with the Office of Values and Ethics, Labour Relations, Occupational Health and Safety whereby these partners within the HR Branch actively promote the use of OICM services at every opportunity.
- Additional Informal Conflict Management Practitioners were hired last year and they possess a strong background in business development and marketing.
- Managers at all levels are now confidently reaching out to OICM and referring the services to others.

FEEDBACK FROM OICM USERS

The OICM is committed to providing quality services for the employees who put their trust in us. There is an assessment system in place allowing users to anonymously complete an online feedback form once the informal conflict management process is complete.

This year, the rate of satisfaction with the OICM's services is approximately 91% (*Table 2*), a percentage that has remained unchanged in recent years. These figures serve as quantitative measures of the informal conflict management practitioners' work and professionalism, but they do not take into account everything achieved by the employees who participate in the process—restoring dialogue with colleagues, arriving at work worry-free and feeling ready to approach difficult conversations are all indicators of success and, in our view, they are the most rewarding ones!

Table 2. Rates of response to the feedback questionnaire

89% of respondents are satisfied with the OICM's efforts to improve their situation.

86% of respondents feel better equipped to handle conflict situations.

93% of respondents believe that the practitioner was unbiased and impartial.

91% of respondents are satisfied with their overall OICM experience.

99% of respondents recommend the OICM's services to other employees.

These testimonials serve as proof.

"I've made a great deal of progress since the meeting. I did some listening exercises and I can really feel the difference in me."

"This was my first time using the service, and I recommend it to everyone. It's much easier to express yourself well and less intimidating to be face-to-face with the person you're in conflict with when you know someone impartial is there to help you. I'm already seeing a positive change in my workplace."

"I felt that the practitioner did a wonderful job listening to me. His guidance was outstanding. I now know that the power to change is within me . . ."

CONCLUSION

Every day, all employees of a department, directorate or team bring everything that defines them to their workplace: who they are, where they have come from and what they have experienced. Some think they are right, but this does not mean others are wrong. Their views and interpretations are simply different, and that is only natural.

The OICM's role is to get people to reconcile these differences through constructive and respectful dialogue. In so doing, it works, along with its key partners, to implement a safe and healthy work environment. We can always do better, but its efforts result in teams speaking to one other, strengths combining and everyone working toward the same goal. This is in keeping with the public service of Canada's broader objective to rely on a healthy and productive workforce by creating conditions that will allow it to achieve optimal performance, not only for its own benefit, but for the benefit of all Canadians who use its services.