

## Training from Failure to Success

*By Donna Bishop*

Remember the childhood story of the little train that succeeded because it thought it could? This is just such a story. In 1985 I worked for the State of Colorado in the Department of Social Services. I had gained a reputation of successfully managing programs that were struggling to improve performance. I always thought I could make a difference.

In Colorado most food stamp programs were administered by the County Departments of Social Services but the state government administered the program for Denver and Colorado Springs. The state had been issued a warning from the federal government that we would lose millions of dollars of federal funding because of mismanagement of the food stamp program. Federal standards allowed a 3% error rate in eligibility determination and the state-run program had an 18% error rate. In other words, out of every 100 cases receiving food stamps 18 didn't qualify for them by federal rules. I was asked to administer this program and given two years to reduce the error rate to the acceptable level.

This state-run program had problems from the beginning. The state actually was forced to assume administering the program from Denver and Colorado Springs because the programs were failing. For five years the state tried to improve performance and had failed. In addition five employees from the program had a civil rights lawsuit pending against the state. I was considered a last ditch effort to turn this failure around and as a result I was given a great deal of support to make changes I thought necessary, short of firing any employees in the lawsuit.

I had 148 employees located in seven offices scattered throughout Denver and Colorado Springs. I started my job by interviewing each one of them individually. I needed to know their job responsibilities but also the issues they were finding in working with the program. I wanted to know them as people and what motivated them. The seven office supervisors started meeting regularly with me to identify immediate actions we could take for retraining the staff to eliminate the technical errors being made in determining eligibility. These were ongoing efforts. However there were other issues that were contributing to low morale which in turn affected daily performance of employees. The physical environment of these offices was way below state standards. New office spaces were located and designed with employee input. New job descriptions were written, salary upgrades were achieved and promotions were made.

Employees began to recognize that they were valued and appreciated for their contributions. The training programs continued to improve performance and the error rate steadily declined.

Prior to my being reassigned to another program, we celebrated the first ever Employee Appreciation Party. It was a potluck affair as no state funds were available for such events. The employees gave me an engraved plaque with these words "To someone who showed us that caring can make a difference."