Reengineering Best Practices No. 2

March 1996

Building Teamwork in USAID'S
Dominican Republic Mission

by

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FOREWORD

We did not know exactly how far we would go with reengineering before we started our experiment in October 1994. But when we began, we decided we would be risk takers and not be afraid of failure. We agreed we would go for the "whole bag of marbles." We would, if necessary, learn from mistakes.

This report gives you a view of the process of change we went through in building teams.

For me, who wanted participation, that meant key decisions would not be made by the front office, but by the entire staff. As we moved ahead, it was apparent that the staff needed training. We had to address the question of how reengineering was going to affect the structure of the Mission. I had no magic answer and neither did anyone else. We were prepared for a long debate on reorganization. Most amazingly, there wasn't one. The staff felt we had to reorganize around our strategic objectives to reflect the new reality in the Mission. A double or parallel structure just would not do, nor would the old office structure. And so we reorganized in strategic objective teams and abolished the technical offices. For us, it has been the right thing to do.

There is one element to which management must be alert. People react differently to change. Some are more comfortable than others going out into uncharted waters. Some much prefer to know the exact course. Mission management has to take the time to make sure that the staff are solidly comfortable in taking on something new and high risk.

We are a very different Mission than when we started out. We know it internally as well as what we hear from our partners, customers and Washington visitors. We are excited about what we are doing and so far have been creative in dealing with the challenge of reduced resources. We also await the new systems to advance our reengineering efforts. The TRG workshop described in the attached report was a defining point for us.

I hope it movitates you to go for the "whole bag of marbles."

Regards,

Marilyn Zak
Mission Director
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BUILDING TEAMWORK IN USAID'S DOMINICAN REPUBLIC MISSION

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In 1994 USAID's Mission in the Dominican Republic was designated a country experimental laboratory for Agency reengineering efforts. That fall, Mission management completed several activities to prepare its staff for a team-based approach to operations. Specifically, it

● Scheduled a Mission-wide retreat, which developed a vision and values statement, built a shared understanding of reengineering concepts, and committed staff to changing the way business is done

● Created a reengineering task force

● Established an Employee Development Committee that helped conduct career enhancement activities

● Organized a strategic management workshop to obtain input and commitment to the Mission's strategic objectives

● Formed strategic objective working groups responsible for sharpening the Mission's strategic objectives

As Mission staff began to implement reengineering concepts, they became aware that many of these concepts were *significantly* changing the way the Mission did business. Mission management, committed to reengineering's core values of empowerment and participation, wanted to avoid imposing strategies and decisions.

Management understood widespread acceptance of new concepts was essential for success. Mission staff needed to understand changes and participate in analyzing options and making choices. Staff needed to make thoughtful decisions about the composition of strategic objective (SO) and results package (RP) teams, selection and responsibilities of team leaders, team relationships with the front office and support offices, and procedures to work closely with customers.

In May 1995, Mission management asked the Training Resources Group (TRG) to help design and conduct a series of workshops on team-based approaches to development. This report describes that effort and includes recommendations for using teams in Mission activities. The goals of the workshops were for Mission staff to

● Understand the team approach and make a commitment to using it for Mission operations

● Decide how the Mission would organize and operate to support new teams

● Build skills and knowledge to be effective team members

● Clarify team leaders' role and build skills needed to be effective

● Identify next steps and create an action ... included a presentation by the facilitator

plan

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

The table above lists major workshop activities and required skills, followed by a session-by-session discussion of the workshop series.

Mission Team-building Exercise Conducted

The entire Mission (67 participants) attended a half-day, team-building work-shop. The agenda entitled "Why Organiza-tions Use Teams...What Does It Get You," and a team-building exercise. The exercise helped participants learn about teamwork.

Strategic Objective Teams Created

The 33 staff members who would become members of strategic objective (SO) teams participated, along with the director and deputy director. The facilitator made a presentation about effective teams, followed by discussion. The group reviewed the purpose and

mandate of SO teams. Individuals were asked to select the strategic objective they were most interested in, agreeing to devote 80 percent of their time to that one strategic objective.

Through analysis and discussion, teams were formed. One issue needed further work before decisions could be made: how much time team members could expect from support offices (controller, project development, and contracts office), and where these team members would sit.

The first assignment of the newly formed SO teams was to identify who would be on their extended (virtual) team. Teams discussed the roles and responsibilities of extended team members and how they might involve extended team members in day-to-day activities.

Principal outcomes

- Individuals designated to work on an SO team selected the team they were most interested in; decisions were not imposed

- Teams began forming themselves—initiating the process of team-building and adopting the values of empowerment and mutual accountability

- SO teams began to share resources, building a win–win, collaborative approach. For example, since human resources were limited, one team's having more resources would jeopardize the success of all other SO teams.

With give and take, each team had to work out the best allocation of human resources among them.

- Decisions were made jointly by the 33 staff members. The director and deputy engaged in discussions but did not impose solutions, indicating the extent to which the teams were empowered.

Leadership Issues Resolved

In one session, participants engaged in discussions on leadership. Previous reading assignments had helped partici-pants understand how other organizations define leadership of self-managing work teams. The facilitator made a presentation on leadership roles and responsibilities, followed by discussion.

Although the director and deputy appointed team leaders, they did not clarify the leaders' role. SO teams met to define their approach to leadership and all discussed various leadership options. Teams worked together to define the role of their team leader. The director made the following statement to team leaders:

> We think you are a good choice for the role of team leader; however, we want to be clear. You will be expected to carry out this role as your team has described it. We see it as a contract between you and your team, and we in the front office will hold you accountable for fulfilling the job as it has been described. If you would rather not take the assignment for any

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EMPOWERED TEAMS

To foster productive teamwork, Mission staff needed to learn new skills and embrace different attitudes. Empowered teams must

◦ Commit to a team approach for Mission operations, including an understanding of the advantages of team models and expected benefits

◦ Conduct appropriate team startup activities that enable teams to clarify their mandate and purpose, establish performance goals, develop and agree on team working agreements, and develop a work plan

◦ Create and maintain a team learning framework that will enable the team to be conscious of its learning and manage its continuous improvement

◦ Test and develop models of high-performing teams: small groups of staff with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, work closely together, hold themselves mutually accountable, and produce extraordinary results

◦ Develop technical, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills to function effectively as a team—this involves several new skills for USAID staff

◦ Help team leaders understand their role and how it differs from a supervisory role. Team leaders must be willing and able to perform in a facilitative, nonhierarchical manner (this is a significant cultural change for USAID staff, involving a number of

reason, that is okay. But if you do accept, you are accepting it as defined.

Each team leader responded to this statement in front of all participants. Each leader said that this was the right way to go and that he or she looked forward to working as a team leader and being a facilitative leader. All agreed to carry out

the job to the best of their ability, as the teams had requested. This was a powerful moment for the teams, and moved them to a deeper level of empowerment and mutual accountability. The teams agreed to turn the definition they had developed for their team leader into a contract between the team and its leader.

Principal Outcomes

● Teams defined the job of team leader for themselves, thus

achieving empowerment

- Team leaders committed to a contract with their teams that calls for them to be facilitative

- All participants developed a common vision of leadership on self-managing teams

- Front office agreed to support teams and team leaders as they set the stage for a different style of leadership

Mission Organization Determined

The director and deputy asked SO teams for suggestions on Mission reorgani-zation to support the teams. After discus-sions and negotiations between teams and support offices, the group reached the following agreements:

SO teams would replace technical offices. Staff thought the Mission's size was a key factor in determining organiza-tion structure. Having both a traditional office structure and an additional structure of SO teams might create conflicting structural frameworks, making change more difficult. The group was determined not to "put old wine in new bottles," a clear consensus agreed to by the director and deputy .

Extent of support office participa-tion on SO teams was decided. A more difficult issue was how much staff time each SO team could have from support offices. The group worked to reach agree-ment in very collaborative, analytical ways. The support offices described their

work volume, shared their concerns about assigning specific individuals to SO teams, made it clear they were willing to work under the team approach, and made offers regarding how much time they could devote to supporting SO teams. Both the SO teams and support offices were satisfied with the agreements reached. Throughout the process, the deputy and director offered suggestions, clarified the big picture, and let the teams and support offices reach their own agreements on how they would work together.

Office space task force created. Another difficult issue was where to locate the desks of the individuals assigned to both an SO team and a support office. Several of the affected staff volunteered to sit with their SO teams; others were more hesitant. After some discussion, the group agreed to appoint an office space task force that would make recommendations on how to allocate space in support of SO teams. This was an exciting development, since key decisions once again were being developed by teams and offices in an empowered environment.

Secretarial support task force created. The group also agreed to appoint a task force to study the secretarial support needs of SO teams, talk with secretaries to determine their interests, and make recom-mendations on how to include secretaries on SO teams.

Principal Outcomes

- The director and deputy participated in discussions, but

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Front Office Role is to

- Provide clear understanding of the Mission's strategic and political context

- Establish vision and direction

- Empower SO teams to make decisions

- Facilitate conflict resolution among SO teams if necessary

- Maintain open communication

- Provide direct and honest feedback

- Create a learning organization by forgiving mistakes at the Mission learns new ways

critical decisions were the result of group consensus

- SO teams were pleased with their organizational decisions and committed themselves to making them work

- SO teams and the support offices negotiated how they would share staff in a collaborative, win–win manner; old turf wars were put aside and anxieties began to diminish

- Office space would be allocated in ways that support the teams' work; in addition, SO teams developed the idea of rearranging space and will work together to reach agreements

Front Office Role Clarified

Each SO team met to discuss the role and responsibilities of the Mission director and deputy, and to describe their expectations. The front office also identified and described its role and responsibilities. The teams and the front office then related their perspectives and agreements were reached. Some of the front office responsibilities agreed to by participants are shown in the box below.

Principal Outcomes

- The front office clearly stated its intent to use a facilitative, coaching management style

- SO teams participated in establishing this management style

Agreements Communicated to Entire Mission

Since SO teams and the front office had reached several agreements, the rest of the Mission needed to be informed. The entire Mission was asked to attend an additional one-day workshop. At the beginning, each SO team workshop participant paired up with one person who had not attended earlier sessions and discussed the decisions that were made. Flipcharts were displayed and each pair walked through the "gallery" and discussed each point. This proved an effective way to develop Mission ownership of the changes.

Team Startup Activities Planned

High-performing teams plan their work before beginning it. This set of actions is called team startup activities. During the work-shops, SO teams had time to think about the four startup activities (listed in the next column), work on some of them, and plan how and when the startup activities would be completed.

The four startup activities are:

1. Within each team, clarify and develop a common understanding of the purpose of the team—its mandate for action.

2. Develop performance goals for the next 6 to 12 months—actual work products and accomplishments to be achieved and for which the team is willing to be held accountable.

3. Develop a set of standards or operating agreements for the team—ways of working together that each team member

can agree to and be held accountable for.

4. Develop a work plan for the next 6 to 12 months.

Effective Team Knowledge and Skills Built

Effective teams have 1) technical skills for their area of work, 2) team problem-solving and decision-making skills, and 3) interpersonal communication skills. Workshop sessions were devoted to developing the team skills. The teams' actual work was used for simulated sessions where specific new skills could be practiced.

For example, a session was held on how to plan and facilitate productive problem-solving and decision-making meetings. The facilitator presented a model, which was used by the teams in their work on real situations. The integration of actual work with a forum to practice new skills is especially effective. It makes training less artificial and accomplishes real work.

Principal Outcomes

- Individuals assessed their own interpersonal communication skills, identified areas for improvement, and worked on these areas

- Teams learned how to plan meetings to solve problems and make decisions by setting meeting outcomes (accomplishments) that are doable within the allotted time and by developing an agenda or step-by-step process to follow to reach the outcomes

- Teams learned and practiced simple team problem-solving models and decision-making techniques

- Teams learned and practiced team communication skills and how to do team facilitation. Team facilitation involves listening to each other, taking turns speaking, constructively con-fronting differences, staying focused on topics, reaching conclusions, recording agreements, summarizing, and ending on time

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of the USAID/ Dominican Republic staff is a good example of how to initiate effective teamwork in an international development setting. TRG appreciates the openness of the USAID/ Dominican Republic staff and their willingness to share their experience so others can learn from it. TRG's recommendations for USAID/ Dominican Republic's continued success in teamwork include the following:

1. *Create a team learning framework.* SO teams need to create and maintain a "team learning" framework to be conscious of the teamwork process: how they work together, what is working well, and what gets in the way. Teams that focus only on work products without an awareness of process risk being less effective teams. Teams need to be conscious and purposeful about learning how to learn.

2. *Provide regular feedback to team leaders.* Team leaders need to be very con-scious of the impact of their behavior on the team. Since this is a new role, team leaders should be reflective and open to feedback from team members. Team leaders should ask the following questions from time to time:

- What am I doing that you find helpful?
- What am I doing that isn't helpful?
- What can I do differently?

Team members must in turn be forthcoming—it is important to talk face-to-face with team leaders about differences.

3. *Consider how extended team members are used.* Teams will have to think through the involvement of extended team members and plan an approach. Just letting it happen may not lead to desired results. What is expected from extended members? How will core team members communicate with them?

4. *SO teams must learn to coach.* Since SO teams also will be responsible for starting up RP teams, they need to be conscious of their coaching role in helping RP teams be effective. Since RP teams will include stakeholders, partners, contractors, and others, the coaching role may be more difficult. RP team members may need training (and coaching) in effective teamwork.

5. *RP teams need startup activities.* RP teams need to go through the same startup activities as SO teams. Neglecting this startup stage could result in problems later. Teams should start from clear agreements, instead of trying to fix things when the inevitable disappointments, frustrations, or anger occur. Fixing

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"broken" teams is difficult and can require costly external organization development skills. Broken teams can be even more costly when results are not achieved.

6. *Empower FSN staff.* Teams that have a dual class structure—the Americans who make important decisions and the FSNs who do not—will be less productive. The Mission and USAID/Washington need to do all they can to delegate to and empower FSN staff. FSN staff need support, coaching, and confidence-building to achieve their potential. And FSNs should be assigned as team leaders, at least on RP teams.

7. *Front office must keep on coaching.*The Mission director and deputy must maintain their role as coaches and continue to empower teams. This is a delicate balancing act. How can the front office disagree with teams without disempowering them? How can they give advice without imposing decisions?

    Without micromanaging, how can they monitor team performance and intervene when necessary? How can they move from a command-and-control style to facilitative coaching? TRG will soon be writing suggested guidelines for Mission directors and deputies about coaching and their contribution to the growth of team performance.

8. *Maintain a positive attitude.* A positive attitude will be an important ingredient during the next year. Change is difficult—people try new behaviors and they make mistakes. Here are some ideas on how to create a positive environment:

- Create small wins and celebrate them

- Find ways to reward extraordinary team performance

- Share and celebrate progress

- Celebrate the boldness to try new things

- Treat mistakes as learning points

- Nurture people who are trying; create safe environments

- Celebrate learning

- Encourage one another

- Avoid complaining or being overly critical

- Use humor—laugh! Be purposeful about having fun