

Central Government Senior Team Coaching Case Study by Victoria Hall

Situation

In 2007 a UK Ministerial department suffered from low productivity silos and low employee engagement. They were well over cost budget and without a foreseeable way of reducing spending to be in a sustainable budget for the future. Programme cuts and workforce reductions would have to occur—some very “corporate-based” decisions which were deemed atypical for government bodies.

Key goals

The Board wanted

1. To create a style of working as the senior team that would offer a step-change in the quality of their decisions and in their ability to form them jointly.
2. To provide clear principles to the next level down to enable aligned decisions. (Presently, too many decisions were bumped up to the Board rather than handled at the appropriate level below them.)
3. To increase their ability to challenge each other rather than operate their sectors of the Department as independent entities. As a result, the burden to manage all tough decisions would not fall solely to the Permanent Secretary.

Methodology

- Interviewed each member of the Board on personal and Board-level challenges to build trust and inform the design of the work.
- Reviewed documents and feedback from various sources, including the Board’s 360 results, employee survey data, and the results of a Cabinet Office-administered Capability Review.
- Administered online questionnaires to each Board member and gave individual feedback.
- Designed and delivered four two-day workshops over six months.
- Provided follow-up meeting(s) with each Board member for observational feedback, development planning, and coaching, as requested.

In the workshops large and small group discussions and working in pairs strengthened cohesiveness. Real work issues were resolved whilst they learned new communication and conflict management skills. We jointly determined the desired agenda for each workshop.

Rather than developing leaders against a pre-conceived model, I helped the team recognise their own natural patterns of behaviour, the impact they have, the natural strengths they can leverage, and collective tendencies that hindered progress. As ineffective behaviours occurred in workshops, I was able to challenge the Board and provide objective feedback, an experience they found invaluable. Consequently, I was invited to observe and provide feedback at some of their biweekly Board meetings.

Outcomes

Through the work on the programme, The Board

- Learned how to form group decisions, which enabled them to solve the £220m budget cut crisis that had been unresolved for six months prior.
- Learned how to give tough messages in the moment and put an end to some detrimental behaviours in their teams.
- Delegated more, shifted their attention higher, and reached a far more effective level of performance.
- Conferred with each other more and agreed on key messages and positioning of issues to Ministers and staff.
- Created an open and collegially challenging atmosphere; talking around contentious topics receded, and a joint team spirit took hold.
- Increased their ability and confidence, which positively affected their relationships with the Secretary of State and Whitehall.