

## **Board of Directors Coaching Case Study**

by Victoria Hall

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Over seven months, I worked with the Board of one of the Ministerial Departments of the UK on strengthening their ability to work collectively as a Board and enabling them to lead a transformational change. The Board desired a non-government, private sector-experienced coach to address their particular challenges. This case study presents:

- The initial context of the client organisation
- The client's needs
- Key relationships with two additional groups of stakeholders
- The approach adopted in providing a solution
- How an emergent crisis was resolved
- The sustainable outcomes for the client as a result.

The case study also highlights a number of themes that are common to senior teams in both the public and the private sectors.

### **INITIAL CONTEXT**

#### ***How do you lead a major change when you've never experienced one?***

When I first met the Board, they had launched an 18-month change programme. The Department suffered from low productivity silos and low employee engagement, and the programme was to create a culture of productive employees who took ownership for results within a context of greater corporate connectivity across the organisation. It included redesigning the organisation's structure, employee selection and evaluation methods, and individual career pathing and development. In addition, the Department was 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. Consequently, the Board was expected to make some very difficult, and very "corporate-based" decisions which were deemed atypical for government bodies.

The Department had selected experienced civil servants and one of the UK's largest leading consultancies to deliver the change programme work. The professionalism and number of these experts was high, as were the stakes for failure of the initiative.

The Directors General (the members of the Board) were highly experienced civil servants, each with multiple accolades for their achievements in the UK and the EU. Their prior experience, however, had not exposed them to leadership development education and to the manner of downsizing characteristically found in leaner, profit-oriented organisations. In addition, some of them had never experienced a large change management programme, nor worked with change management consultants.

### **CLIENT NEEDS: LEADING CHANGE, TEAM BUILDING, AND JOINT DECISION MAKING**

#### ***Everybody learns on the job, but what do you do when getting it right the first time is vital?***

Beyond leading the change programme, the Board wanted 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. Furthermore, this new style of working would provide clear principles to the next level down so that they could make aligned decisions. Presently, too many decisions were bumped up to the Board rather than handled at the appropriate level below them.

The Departmental change programme was designed to break down silos, yet the Board themselves operated their sectors of the Department as independent entities. They were highly collegial and respectful of each other's expertise. As a result, they did not adequately challenge each other. As a result, an increased burden then fell to the Permanent Secretary to manage tough decisions.

The Board desired an external coach whose experience base was more corporate than public, who was independent of the change programme, and who could support them in their leadership of it and their ability to work as a team. I subsequently designed a series of workshops to increase the Board's self-awareness and to equip them for the management responsibilities resulting from the change programme. Throughout the workshops, the Board addressed their real work challenges through their learning.

Their need was similar to the need of many private sector Board members who, whilst having vast experience in running companies, have difficulty in delivering the human element of change agendas. Action learning events, bespoke to the particular Board and their specific challenges, concerns, and environment are in order.

It is critical in these situations to use a consultant who can work at a senior level to assess and address the Board's needs quickly and flexibly, and who can develop their capabilities within the context of the real work. In addition, each Board, like any other team, has its own dynamic. Unlocking the elements that hold the Board back from truly effective performance as a well-integrated team or working group (whichever is appropriate) is also of the utmost importance.

## KEY RELATIONSHIPS

### *Who needs to be kept close for the ultimate benefit of the client?*

**The HR Leadership Development Staff** While the Board were my coaching clients, two of the leadership development staff members were my organisational clients. I had been brought in to the project by one of them who previously worked for a global banking client of mine. The two internal leadership development consultants were the sponsors for the Board's development and success. They also owned key aspects of the change management programme. Finally, as part of the organisation, they were experiencing the difficulties that resulted in low employee satisfaction and low productivity. Accordingly, I worked to keep them very close, and collaborated with them on each phase of the Board's development plan, without breaching confidentiality. Throughout the project I also served as ad hoc coach to them in managing their own complicated relationships with all parties involved.

**The Change Management Consultants** As the change management programme was centred on leadership, it was critical for me to form a collegial, separate-yet-aligned working relationship with the change management consultants. I met with the senior partner of the consulting firm and two members of the change team to discuss how we could each work for the benefit of the client without duplication of effort. I was helping the Board develop as a team and as leaders. They, in partnership with the Department's staff, were creating new leadership programmes, a competency framework, talent review practices, and development paths for employees. Unless we were willingly and collaboratively aligned, either the change programme or my development programme could have been negatively affected. Confidentiality with the Board as their leadership challenges were faced would be maintained, yet at the same time I needed to keep the change team members close.

**Multiple Partnerships** Ultimately, the two HR Leadership Development consultants, the consultancy senior partner, and I formed mutually supportive working relationships for the

benefit of our client. We linked in with each other on multiple issues, particularly on the timing of what was presented to the Board. For example, the new competency framework had to be rolled out and approved by the Board before I covered Talent Review and staff development. The design for teaching the Board the competency framework also had to be appropriate for senior level executives and the types of decisions they would make using the tool, so I was brought in on this piece of work. My collaboration with both the HR Leadership Development specialists and the consultancy team lasted throughout the project, making all of us more knowledgeable and effective for our mutual client.

## **DATA GATHERING**

### ***What is the current situation and what strengths can be leveraged?***

I began the engagement by interviewing each member of the Board. This not only served to begin to build trust with each member, but also informed the design of both the group and individual learning plans. I next administered two online questionnaires for each Board member. The results of these I kept confidential and would later give feedback on them to each Board member. Initially, however, I used the results to inform me of the individual and collective profiles of the Board.

This data naturally needed to be validated through further discussion with and observation of the Board, but it provided me a quick blueprint of what to look for in this particular Board so as to start to be impactful quite quickly. In using this data, I was **not** looking to develop stronger leaders against some pre-conceived model, but rather I would use the data to help individuals and the Board as a whole to recognise their own predilections and what impact they have on their unique environment, given the goals they had set. Which natural strengths could be leveraged for individual and collective benefit? Which collective tendencies needed to be overcome? Which predilections were not currently demonstrated by the Board, but may occur when under stress? Ultimately, building their self-awareness on their natural tendencies would increase their ability to respond effectively to any adversity and to affect change positively in the future.

As a final stage of data gathering, I reviewed documents on the change programme and various feedback sources, including the Board's 360 results, employee survey data, and the results of a Cabinet Office-administered Capability Review. This data better informed me of the reasons for the change management programme and the various stakeholder views of my client, the Board.

## **THE BOARD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

### ***How do Boards learn together?***

I delivered four workshops to the Board over six months. In the first workshop, they made the decision on how they ideally wanted to work together (as a team or a working group), and openly discussed the barriers and advantages to doing so. In the workshops smaller group discussions were held, as well as work in pairs, and some real work-based role play for practicing new communication and conflict management skills. At key junctures, the Board's feedback was sought and a change in direction was made if deemed necessary. At the end of each workshop we jointly determined the desired agenda for each subsequent meeting. I presented the agenda items to the internal leadership development consultants, and together we agreed a final agenda.

In the first workshop, I had occasion to see demonstrated some of the behaviours on which the Board had received feedback. Having already built trust with the Board on both

individual and team levels, I was able to challenge them and provide objective feedback on some ineffective behaviours as they occurred, an experience they found invaluable. As a result, I was invited to observe and provide feedback at some of their biweekly Board meetings.

Prior to the second workshop, I met individually with each Board member again, this time to give them feedback on the personality inventories they had taken. In these sessions, I revisited their comments from the data gathering interviews and checked to see how their views may have changed. I also interlaced my observations of them and how they interact with their colleagues into the feedback session. I then partnered with each Board member to form their personal development goals in how they can best work with their colleagues on the Board and in leading their organisation. Several Board members requested additional follow-up coaching.

## **A CRISIS RESOLVED THROUGH LEARNING**

### ***What return on investment is there?***

Between Workshops 1 and 2, a series of external events in Britain brought this Ministerial Department prominently into the public eye. The Department was overloaded with immediate calls to action and more demands of their time and resources. Unfortunately, this came at a time when each of the UK's Ministerial Departments was nearing completion of a six-month budget cutting process. Decisions on how to cut more than £250m from the Department's budget had stalled. Despite the best efforts of the highly professional Strategy and Finance teams, the Board was not managing to re-think the way they approached prioritisation of the multitude of public programmes the Department supported. The Permanent Secretary desired to do more than a universal percentage paring of the budget, which would render some narrowly funded programmes completely ineffective, and exhorted the Board to try to radically re-think the budget cuts. A criteria-led approach was also unhelpful, as each sector of the Department was so specialised that developing the broad criteria would be a lengthy process in itself which ultimately could prove fruitless. Overweighing everything was the knowledge that each cut could mean a cost to various sectors of the people of Britain who relied on the support the Department provided.

The Head of Finance conferred with The Head of Strategy who then approached me about using the time we had allocated for Workshop 2 for further work on the budget, as the deadline was looming fast. No other day was in each Board member's diary when they could all meet to do the budget work. Was there somehow I could make the development workshop a working budget session at the same time? I replied that there certainly was a way to do exactly that and outlined my thinking. He agreed and I redesigned Workshop 2 so that the Board would learn a group decision framework and apply it to the budget problem. This was designed to run in parallel to sophisticated financial review tools the Strategy and Finance teams had developed.

Many teams get stuck in complicated decisions because they evaluate and eliminate ideas as quickly as they are proposed. They soon run out of ideas and are no further along in solving the problem. We worked through the budget problem by examining the roots of the issue, and by focusing on possibilities and full understanding of each other's thoughts, rather than on deductive dissection, premature judgement, and refutation. At key points throughout the day, Board members worked in pairs to critically examine and distil the thinking. This work further honed their skills in the new communication and conflict management methods they had previously learned. By the end of the workshop, they had developed not one, but several viable strategies for resolving the problem. Over the next few days they did further work on the strategies and chose one to utilise. Within a week of Workshop 2 the Board reconvened and in one six-hour session, they managed to winnow away another £220m. This outcome was achieved in a collaborative manner and with the

support of their staffs, and marked the beginning of the new way that the Board handled difficult joint decisions. They also were better prepared to deliver the resulting difficult messages to their Ministerial team, to staff and constituents. As a consequence of the Board's increased ability and confidence, their relationship with the Secretary of State improved considerably as well.

## **OUTCOMES**

### ***What does success look like?***

By learning better team communications skills, the Board had—in one week and with a lot of hard work—solved what had been unresolved for the preceding six months. They were now on a sustainable budget projection for future years.

Building on the budget success, the Board developed a pattern of handling internal decisions with greater efficiency. They conferred with each other more, both in Board meetings and informally. They developed their own names for the discussion techniques and incorporated them into every Board meeting, even taking delight in calling each other on the “old” behaviours and encouraging use of the new ones. Not only did this keep the learning fresh in their minds, but it created a feeling of openness and effective challenge. Pontification or talking around contentious topics receded and a joint team spirit took hold.

Together, they developed key messages and positioning of issues to Ministers and staff. They had learned how to give tough messages in the moment and now effectively put an end to some detrimental behaviours in their teams. They regularly agreed on key messages to their teams on various topics and began a culture shift from rumour mill to transparency. All of this took additional effort and time, and so in the final workshop we covered effectiveness from a positive psychology lens. This challenged them to re-focus on their own individual motivations and careers. Through this reflection they were later able to shift their attention higher, delegate more, and reach a far more effective level of Board performance.

A few months after Board coaching ended, the change programme was completed and implemented with the Board fulfilling their leadership roles. Through later follow-up with the Permanent Secretary, I learned that the Board still uses their learning in Board meetings, continues to build on their success as a cohesive team, and now enjoys a greatly strengthened reputation in Whitehall.