



Developing team effectiveness: working together and providing collective leadership

Context

WaterAid is a charity with a mission to transform lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation. In May 2010, the AoEC coaching team began to work with WaterAid’s International Programmes Department senior management team, who have responsibility for Asia and Africa. They were beginning to agree an operational plan in support of the global strategy. Their commitment was to invest £112 million by 2013 to support 11.5 million people globally. As a result of this ambitious plan, the team commenced a major review of its regional operating approach, structure and processes. This involved a lengthy period of uncertainty and the development of plans that would impact the organisation throughout the regions.

At the beginning of the work, two of the eight members of the team announced that they were leaving; one almost immediately and whose function was not being replaced and one of the regional heads who resigned with the intention of returning to Africa some 9 months later and whose position would be filled. The team included people of five different nationalities.

The client team members were based in London, with the exception of the regional head for West Africa who was based in Ghana. The team all travel extensively therefore their ‘meetings’ typically take place over the phone, with at least one or two people working in different time zones. They come together in person on average once every two months for a few days, depending on travel commitments.

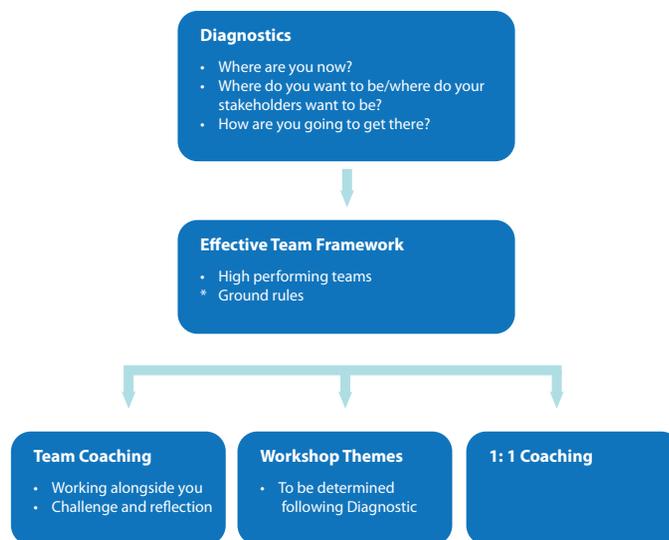
The team were about to begin a critical piece of work for the organisation, so it was a good time to look at how they might build on their achievements to date and become a more effective, high performing team. In addition, the team had been attending an internal Leadership Programme and were keen to integrate the learning from that.

Aims

WaterAid’s ultimate aim was to develop their team effectiveness to the extent that the results were felt by both the organisation and themselves as individuals.

Approach

Following meetings with the team leader, the Director of International Programmes, and the Leadership Development Manager, the AoEC coaching team ‘the coaches’ met with the IPD Senior Management Team ‘the client team’ and proposed a Team Coaching Process for their work that would involve both individual coaching and work with the team as a whole.



The team coaching began with a Team Diagnostic. The aim of this was to have a very clear understanding of how the team was meeting the standards and expectations of its stakeholders, as well as those of its members.

The focus and methodology of the diagnostic was agreed with the SMT. Once completed, the results were shared with the team in a workshop and used as a basis to agree the best approach for the coaches to support them in becoming a more effective team. As part of the workshop each team member received feedback on what their colleagues felt they could “stop, start and continue”.

Individual coaching also began at this stage, with each team member deciding how they wished to use their individual coaching time. It was an opportunity to reflect on the feedback from colleagues and the challenges they faced in their individual roles and as members of the team.

“While we had a functioning senior management team, we were conscious that we could be more effective in working together and provide collective leadership to the department. The question was – how? The team coaching thus came at an opportune time. The key focus for us when we started was on the regional review (clarifying the role, restructure and relocation of the regional teams) – a particularly challenging time when we needed to think long term and, as a senior management team, identify propositions that would be in the best interests of the organisation in delivering the global strategy. Our coaches helped us work through this critical phase, whilst also contributing significantly to a better understanding on the purpose of our team and the need for us to focus on our collective endeavour, and thus be effective as a leadership team”.

Girish Menon
 Director of International Programmes, WaterAid

What did we do?



The Coaching Commission

The results of the Team Diagnostic showed with real clarity the many strengths of the team and areas that would benefit from further attention. It was agreed by the team and coaches that the focus of their work together would be:

Collective leadership – how could the team take collective responsibility for their aims and have shared accountability for a common goal? What was their common goal and how do they align to it? What changes needed to take place to lead as a team, rather than a group of individuals?

Awareness – what does good look like? How are we getting in our own way? What are the things that are stopping us performing to the best of our ability as individuals and as a team?

Communication – how do we have higher quality conversations? How do we build trust, empowerment, support and challenge? How do we use our time together more productively? How can we create an environment where we can have difficult conversations?

It was agreed that the coaches' approach to supporting the team in these areas would be to do two things:

1. To spend time with them as a team in a coaching environment to build knowledge, skill and awareness around the areas outlined above.
2. To work with them in-situ as a team to provide feedback and on-the-spot coaching as they began to try different ways of working together.

Awareness

The team were keen to start the work with awareness and build a clear picture of what good looks like for an effective team.

Using a Team Effectiveness Framework, evolved from Peter Hawkins 5 C's model, the coaches provided the team with a framework against which both coaches and the team could reference their progress.

The Team Diagnostic provided clarity about what was working and what needed more focus – applying the model to this information allowed them to see how the component parts would impact the whole.



Dialogue

With this clarity the next area of focus for the team was dialogue. Building on the time the coaches had spent observing the team, the data from the Team Diagnostic and using work by William Isaacs and David Bohm, they explored with the team what constitutes productive dialogue in a team environment. This provided the client team with a framework to support them while discussing some of the very important issues around their team communication.

The team began to discuss what stops them having challenging conversations, how they could hold each other more accountable, how 'undiscussables' could be brought to the table and how trust could be built through better dialogue.

Conversations around dialogue led the team to address issues of establishing priorities and being more effective in how they use their time, drawing on the Eisenhower (sometimes called the Covey) matrix.

The outcome of this work was that the team agreed some principles of how they would like to approach dialogue going forward. The coaches then worked with them in-situ to support them while trying out these new ways of working. This was also followed up in one-to-one coaching.

What did we do?



Collective Leadership

One of the issues that the team chose to discuss, while practicing their new skills around dialogue, was their collective leadership. Within this discussion their aim was to reach a shared understanding of what their commission was that would enable them to take it to their stakeholders and ensure that everyone had the same understanding of their team purpose. The secondary aim of this piece of work was to start to develop a team mindset which meant that everyone would be putting the aim of the team over and above their individual goals.

Review of Learning and Moving On

By the end of March 2011, the client team had completed the regional review. They had established clear priorities as a senior management team and were ready to move on to the next phase of transition and implementation of the new strategy and way of working. In the final team coaching session in June, which brought the programme to a close, the team recognised the need to revisit and clarify their common purpose and collective endeavour in order to fulfil their strategic priorities and lay the groundwork for the next phase. They:

- Assessed how their team effectiveness has been enhanced, informed by a further Diagnostic
- Explored the shifts they needed to make, as a team and as individuals, to sustain and continue to improve their performance, particularly as they will be working even more virtually in the future (based on completion of the BCG Team Performance Appraisal).
- Assessed how their team effectiveness had been enhanced, informed by a further Team Diagnostic.

The Feedback

The final Team Diagnostic noted significant improvements in team effectiveness. Observations included that “relationships are deeper and stronger” and that the team were “phenomenal” during the regional review. They took ownership and responsibility together and seem to have “moved on from being polite to having healthy debate”.

They made courageous decisions with no personal agenda; they listened to each other and to advice and were prepared to change course when they understood the consequences. Overall, “the level of support and challenge within the group has definitely gone up”.

They showed a collective endeavour; the collective aims of the organisation were seen as “far higher than those of the individuals” and “they now have a collective voice which wasn’t seen before”.

They were seen as having stepped up as a leadership team “definitely leading from the front” and “in terms of taking the organisation with them, they couldn’t have done better”.

Their colleagues also echoed their own recognised challenges for the future including the need to work at some matrix relationships between London and countries, to achieve cohesion in the management structure and to retain their collegiate style notwithstanding an even more virtual way of working.

The work detailed in this case study was carried out by Executive Team Coaches Alison Hogan and Elke Anderson as part of their AoEC Systemic Team Coaching Master Practitioner Diploma qualification:
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