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Getting Results ASAP¹: How Creating a Team of Consultants Can Enhance Performance and Accountability

Where do you find a team of professionals that can help implement a program across an entire region in a consistent, effective, and efficient way—and over an extended period? You custom-build it! And that's just what we did for the AIDS Strategy and Action Plan (ASAP) program in Latin America and the Caribbean. This SmartLesson shares how we developed the team and what we learned.

Background

The World Bank, UNAIDS, and other partners created ASAP in 2005 to address the concern that most countries did not have sufficient capacity to plan for and appropriately manage their national HIV/AIDS strategic responses. ASAP's main emphasis is on strategic planning at the national level, and the program also provides technical guidance, along with knowledge transfer, consultation, and quality assurance. After a successful year-long pilot in Honduras, demand for ASAP support across the region was high.

In 2008, the ASAP program was poised to scale up operations across Latin America. The ASAP team in Washington knew we would need multiple consultants to implement a range of planned activities in several locations simultaneously. All of us had worked with individual consultants before, but we felt that we needed a fresh approach and a different kind of working arrangement for this project. We wanted to capture the best aspects of working with consultants, minimize the potential downsides, and use our funds wisely. Most of all, we wanted to manage the high demand for ASAP support, and use a common approach to deliver high-quality products and services to our clients.

We ended up establishing and mentoring a team of nine consultants that we've used on a regular basis across the region. We put each

consultant through an intensive period of knowledge transfer in the ASAP methodology and approach, as well as in additional skills such as strategic planning, data compilation, and results frameworks. Since most of the interactions among the team would be virtual, we worked a lot on team building. And we provided ongoing coaching and mentoring, as well as rapid feedback on written work. As a result, this group has become a team of flexible technical experts *from the region, for the region*.

Thanks to this approach, not only have we achieved program goals ahead of schedule, but the team's work also has resulted in some unexpected positive outcomes. For example, some ASAP countries have requested even more sophisticated analyses and additional support to fill critical gaps in knowledge (showing that countries are using the products and want to have more in-depth information). In addition, the consultants have a heightened sense of ownership and are proud of the product they've helped develop.

Lessons Learned

1) Putting together a real team of consultants requires more than just hiring competent individuals and telling them to work together. First, you have to choose the right people, then make the best use of their abilities.

Finding experienced, reliable consultants who can produce quality deliverables is a challenge

¹ As an interagency mechanism created by the UNAIDS partnership, ASAP is a service of UNAIDS managed by the World Bank Global HIV/AIDS Program (GHAP).

that managers face across the World Bank Group. Add to that the need to have them work well *together*, and *long-term*, and here are some of the challenges you run into:

- *Identifying and hiring smart, skilled consultants is common—but keeping that talent can be problematical. Good consultants are often busy, and after a mission is over they may not be available for future projects.*
- *Seasoned consultants bring a wealth of experience—a good thing, right? But sometimes consultants have developed their own way of doing things and may tend to “play by their own rules” in the field.*
- *A consultant may have just the right skills mix for a certain mission, but there might be personality issues—difficulty getting along well with the team, project staff in-country, or the client.*
- *An individual consultant may be parachuted in at the last minute, and may only meet Bank colleagues after arrival in the country. In such cases, meaningful team-building is practically impossible, and a difficult personality can affect the productivity of the entire mission.*

ASAP wanted to build a team of consultants who could work well together over time and implement a structured program, yet have the skills, knowledge, initiative, and confidence to innovate when circumstances warranted. To do that, we focused on finding consultants who had broad general skills as well as specific experience working on HIV/AIDS issues. We tried to identify consultants who could work well as a team *and* be comfortable working independently and at a distance. We let them know that if they performed well, we would do our best to use them as often as possible. And we have!

Working with them as a team over many months has allowed us to take advantage of the mix of strengths and skills. The ASAP consultants now know each other well, and ASAP managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of each. We can pair up our consultants so that their strengths are complemented, making our missions effective and productive, and increasing the consultants' job satisfaction.

2) Ensure consistency and standardized work products, yet allow consultants to innovate in response to local conditions.

Consistency and standardization. Knowledge transfer is an important element in this approach. To ensure consistency, we made sure each consultant was thoroughly coached in the ASAP methodology and approach, as well as in additional skills such as strategic planning, data compilation, and results frameworks. We also have our consultants travel in teams of two or three. This practice has proven to be critical, especially as new consultants are learning how to implement the ASAP strategy. Newer consultants can learn from more experienced team members and then replicate the methodology themselves on future missions.

Adaptability. Coaching and mentoring strengthen the consultants' confidence in their ability to respond to client needs. The lead consultant and management team provide continual and timely feedback, address problems proactively, and reinforce consultants' understanding of the high expectations for work quality. For example, if in the middle of a mission there is a need to extend its length or there are unexpected demands from the clients, the consultants (who are considered the “eyes and ears” of ASAP) are expected to provide solutions and are given the latitude to adjust the strategy. At the same time, they know that their work is closely monitored and that ASAP backstops are on alert and ready with a quick response to support them if necessary.

Transferability. Having a solid team also means that lessons learned in one place can be immediately shared and implemented in other ASAP countries and across the region. Working as a team results in a lot of cross-fertilization of ideas among consultants, which improves the quality of the service we provide. For example, when the Bolivia team made some methodological improvements in a critical database, the Ecuador and Paraguay teams, who were simultaneously on missions, were informed. The feedback that the teams in Ecuador and Paraguay provided was incorporated into the new methodology, and it was replicated in all three locations.

Innovation. Team members are encouraged to think outside the box, to constantly challenge the methodologies, approaches, and products, and to listen to dissenting voices and to ideas provided by stakeholders in the field as a source of improvement and innovation.

3) Managing a regionally dispersed team requires a different set of management tasks—and a creative approach to team interaction.

We had our lead consultant, resident in Haiti, manage the day-to-day work of the rest of the team. This way, Bank staff—together with the lead consultant—can focus attention on critical partnerships, longer-term planning, performance issues, problem prevention, and other broader issues that link operations with policy and results.

The lead consultant, in consultation with Bank staff, assigns tasks and reviews the work of consultants in the field. Consultants agree to be in touch with the lead consultant every day when they are on assignment, keeping him apprised of the mission's progress. Consultants are expected to respond quickly, not only to the client but also to other team members. The lead consultant allows members of the team to “be their own boss” in the field, but holds them to a high level of productivity, accountability, and work quality.

We also wanted the team to function as cohesively as they would if we worked together in the same office every day. The entire team is in communication via regular and frequent group e-mails and phone conferences. Face-to-face meetings are held at least twice a year at different locations within the region, where the team members discuss program performance and improvements, share lessons learned, and work through challenges.

Communication is critical to the team's functioning, and our management style had to adapt to the realities of a geographically dispersed team. We worked on building trust in and appreciation for each other, and moving the team forward together. Since team communication lacked the nonverbal messages that in-person communication provides, we had to learn to read between the lines with the consultant team. We paid attention to how consultants engaged with the team, and to their communication styles. We followed up on details, such as why a team member appeared disengaged, seemed to lack enthusiasm, was not responsive, did not participate, or missed deadlines. We never assumed that verbal communication was enough, so we stayed on top of team communication by documenting conference calls and confirming discussions, conclusions, and next steps. Most important, we listened and we fostered multidirectional open communication.

4) To ensure the level of consistency that benefits clients, ease new team members into the client relationship.

Under our ASAP team approach, the support and advice provided to clients across the region are consistent. The entire team understands and implements the same approach, no matter the location. Although team members work across the region, individual consultants often return to the same country on multiple trips, so that relationships with the client last beyond one mission.

Clients also benefit from the team's emphasis on quality. Our team makes certain that deliverables are peer-reviewed by two or three people before the client sees them.

To maintain a high level of quality and consistency, we mentor consultants into the relationship with the client. On their first trip to a country, less experienced consultants travel with the lead consultant or with more experienced colleagues. These new consultants can observe not only how the ASAP material is presented and how the ASAP approach is implemented, but also how the client and the ASAP team interact, such as in the stakeholder meeting that launches ASAP work in partner countries. Typically, new consultants play a relatively passive role on the first missions. However, they are expected to perform, to contribute,

and to provide ideas for innovation. They may even be asked to actively participate in the debriefing, to present part of a presentation, or to provide answers related to their areas of expertise. But they don't interact with the clients alone until they are functioning comfortably as part of the team.

5) To retain good consultants, the team structure should align incentives with performance.

Our structure aligns incentive with performance via an agreement to hire the consultants for the maximum number of days possible, as long as they're meeting client needs and their work performance merits continued employment. The number of consultants on the team is small (currently nine), and they are used over and over. Consequently, turnover is very low, and in the few instances where consultants have left the team, it was to accept full-time employment with another HIV/AIDS program.

Conclusion

We believe that the team approach implemented within the ASAP program also benefits the World Bank, in that our work with the consultant team is building local knowledge and professional capacity. Owing to the skills they gained with ASAP, some of our consultants have found full-time jobs with other development partners (both national and international), but they remain associated with the program through an informal ASAP alumni group. In this way, the Bank's network of professional contacts is growing and deepening throughout Latin America.



The ASAP consultant team for Latin America and the Caribbean region.



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