



Summary Note: PAPUA NEW GUINEA, LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP, 2004

2004: Leadership Skills for Conducting Difficult Conversations

Background:

In mid-2003, the World Bank Country Manager for Papua New Guinea approached the World Bank's Learning and Organizational Effectiveness unit (LOE) with a challenge. Inspired by the transformative experiences provided by professional facilitation during the Bank's internal program for managers (the New Managers' Leadership Program), the Country Manager proposed that the Bank provide facilitation expertise for a similar intervention in service of the national leadership of Papua New Guinea.

At the time, the relationship between the PNG leadership and the international donor community was in virtual deadlock; challenges were significant, and the complexity seemed overwhelming to all parties. Relationships were functioning at a very low level where creative or strategic thinking seemed impossible because only two extremes were available – either differences of opinion were treated as severe conflicts warranting “battle”, or conflict was avoided to such an extent that interactions were reported to be limited to those that were “superficial and artificially gentle”. National leaders, and their counterparts in the international community, needed to develop skills that would allow them to successfully conduct difficult conversations about critical issues.

Process: Two essential activities were necessary before the workshop itself could be designed and delivered – an assessment visit to Port Moresby in which the LOE facilitator spoke with national leaders and with resident representatives of the donor community, and a series of informal interviews outside of PNG in which the facilitator collected perspectives and opinions from a range of Bank professionals involved in the situation but not central enough to be target participants for the planned workshop. A fortunate and increasing degree of openness was evident in most of these assessment discussions, enabled partially by a widely-shared trust in the judgment of the Bank Country Manager (whose conviction had been the genesis for the workshop), and partially by the facilitator's national background and personal style (which allowed him to be perceived by the national leaders as “one of us”).

The key aspects of the preparatory discussions included:

- exploring perceptions of Government and donors of the current situation
- using those perceptions to develop a consensus “diagnosis”
- developing an outline for an intervention that could credibly be expected to address that “diagnosed” problem

Setting and Structure:

Based on this process of assessment and discussion, the facilitator designed a series of nested events – a workshop with the key members of the PNG government – the Central Agency Coordinating Committee, a session with the representatives of the donor agencies, and then a joint session. The series of events, taken as a whole, included:

- exploring perceptions of “credibility” and “honest brokers”
- using examples of dysfunctional organizational pathologies like “gentle decision avoidance” within the World Bank itself (“sharing our own past, our own problems”)
- clarifying the dangers of avoiding difficult discussions; and
- practicing the skills required to undertake those difficult discussions (including managing the consequences).

Workshop Format and Content:

In order to make it possible for the participants to “practice” skills in an effective and deeply-felt experiential setting, the facilitator used the information gathered during his assessment interviews to create scenarios that mimicked the “hot buttons” in the current dysfunctional situation. Then, participants formed groups of three in which each one was assigned a role as:

1. role player – following a short written guide clearly articulating this “role” and it’s concerns, biases, and behaviors
2. respondent – helping to manage the conversation by responding to the role player in a productive and effective manner using a checklist provided as a guide for listening, inquiry and feedback skills.
3. observer – watching the interaction between role player and respondent to identify how the dynamic was made different from the existing dysfunction simply by having one of the two sides use new pro-active techniques, noting the differences using a prepared checklist

Each participant played every role. Participants were videotaped in their first effort. After practicing each skill, they returned to their original pairing and the same case and were again videotaped on their repeat exercise. They compared the differences in the approaches they employed before and after the skill training.

A critical aspect of the success of these triad role-plays was that key participants were assigned to “play” other roles, roles of individuals who were “in real life” considered their enemy or primary opponent.

After the role-plays were complete, elements of the key positive behaviors that were exhibited were elicited by the facilitator through Socratic inquiry – and participants were uniformly both surprised and heartened when, at the end, the facilitator revealed to them his prepared PowerPoint slides that summarized the “general lessons” – in which all of their own self-generated, “specific” lessons were included!

Once these specific lessons were drawn out by the participants themselves, they worked with support from the facilitator to operationalize those lessons in the form of a checklist, and then undertook exercises to practice those newly identified skills.

This summary note was prepared by the LICUS unit in OPCS, as a companion to the “Dissemination Note on Leadership Workshops, 2001-2004” jointly issued in December 2004 by the LICUS unit and the Public Sector Governance unit in PREM. The content of this summary was reviewed by the workshop organizers responsible for the event.

For further information on the workshop in PNG, please contact Mahesh Sharma, PNG Country Manager.