

## Public Sector Transformation Driven by Action Learning

Over the years respective Governments of the Caribbean Region have outlined their vision for a Transformed Public Sector. Earlier this year, Jamaica's Prime Minister Andrew Holness, in one of his Speeches on Public Sector Transformation noted:

*A transformed public sector is dynamic, innovative and responsive to the needs of citizens and businesses, and embraces technology to improve productivity at work. It is constantly measuring itself, and improving, and sees the citizen as the customer to be served.*<sup>1</sup>

The achievement of this vision rests on increasing the professionalism of public servants, and changing the public sector culture and operating environment to reflect one of increased effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and responsiveness to citizens' needs.

While each of our respective countries in the Region are at varying stages of development, we do know just how critical an imperative it is for us to transform our institutions, including, and especially our public sector. For we do recognize that a high performing public sector is the foundation for the achievement of national goals, economic development and societal well-being.

But why aren't we having the public sector transformation we envisage in spite of the passage of time?

### What makes public sector transformation so difficult ?

- **A Disconnect between Reform & Transform**
  - Some of our activities have been for reform even though we say we are transforming.
  - With reform we tinker with change and so it is not deep and lasting and before you know it, we have gone back to the old familiar ways of doing things.
  - Transformation transcends the test of time – in just the way a butterfly can never return to being a caterpillar.
- **The Prevailing Culture**
  - Culture of bureaucracy, with rules and a steadfast compliance to the rules.
  - Rules and compliance while having its place, stifles creativity and innovation which are akin to transformation
  - An Individualistic culture – we grow up as individuals in the system – and fail to have that line of sight of how what we do as individuals is part of a bigger whole
  - There are multiple points of direction from which the call for transformation comes and they are not coordinated.
  - The identified implementers of transformation are often not persons of change – they are not vested in transformation and are just going through the motions.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech on Public Sector Transformation, by the Prime Minister Andrew Holness, Thursday January 5, 2017.

- Not sufficient/immediate repercussion for not transforming – It's not that to which we are each held accountable to make happen.
- **Weak Collaborative Synergy**
  - Inability of the Public Service to engage self - to collaborate
  - There are multiple points of direction that are not coordinated and appear to be in competition.
  - These multiple points are unable to synergize and provide a single vision and point of direction to the wider public sector.
- **A Leadership Crisis**
  - There is no clear point of authority or clear vision for transformation. There is no ownership for transformation. There is no champion.
  - Weak and uncoordinated Leadership
  - Leaders fear the unknown – cannot work in ambiguity – must have all the answers and does not realize they cannot and will not have them.
  - Lack of understanding of Change and Transition and what attends each – does not know the leader he/she ought to be in the process – lack the competencies for leading transformation.

**How the action learning coach helps public officers overcome hurdles to transformation:**

If nothing else has become more apparent for the public services of the Region, it is that training/learning and development is the heart from which public sector transformation will gain life and purpose. Similarly, we recognize the need to ensure our leadership development platform is sufficiently aligned to the current demands of the environment for greater governance and leadership excellence, in support of public sector transformation. Such that leadership development becomes not “... the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire!” This necessitates a learning experience that:

- ✓ Is clear about supporting individual learning needs but gives strategic priority to the interconnected networks of stakeholders.
- ✓ Makes space for controversial and sensitive issues
- ✓ Raises broader awareness of new ways to doing business and treating with problems
- ✓ Creates Leaders who will invent the future
- ✓ Develops leaders who build community and communities of practice.
- ✓ Has Leaders incorporate learning into the system – they are taking their work to the learning space and the learning space to the work place
- ✓ Supports leaders to survive and thrive in the public service environment

As we contemplate all of this we do readily see the alignment with the components of AL. We recognize:

1. The Problem
2. The Group
3. A process that encourages questioning and listening
4. A resolution to take action
5. A commitment to learning; AND
6. An Action Learning Coach who serves as a Catalyst for Transformation. One who:
  - **Stimulates reflection, learning and growth**
    - As the Coach tests out what the Group thinks they are doing – what they are doing well and what they could do better, the group is helped in the process to focus their attention to not just solving the problem but to being a better team.
    - Additionally as the Coach listens for learning opportunities, he/she uses positive questions to bring the learning to the group's awareness, encouraging learning and growth.
  - **Establishing and building group relationship**
    - From the first AL session the relationship between group members begin to develop and grow, as they are encouraged to shift their conversations from statements to questions, and thus come to realize that their real power as a team is not in showcasing their individual knowledge, but rather, it's about finding out what it is they do not know as a group so as to be able to fully address the problem at hand. The AL Coach facilitates this equalizing and transformation.
  - **Encouraging group empowerment**
    - The Coach empowers the Group to set its own goals.
    - The Coach Doesn't just focus on what transpires in the session, but helps the group understand the how and why of their actions
    - The Coach's focus is on learning and not just on problem solving, supporting the Group's learning and growth.

Where there is no learning there is no change/no transformation. For learning to take place there must be the programmed knowledge, the questions that facilitates reflection and in turn allow for connections to be made, which inspire the change and relational practice that makes the learning transcend the individuals to the social spaces between them and creates the transformation.

### Three real life cases

#### 1. Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB)

- **About ECCB**
  - ✓ Established as the first multi-state central bank in the world, ECCB issues currency,

- ✓ Regulates the financial system and provides advice for balanced growth and development to the governments of its 8 member states.
- **In 2016 the ECCB embarked on a Leadership Development Programme** aimed at strengthening the capability of all levels of its leadership and management team, to more fully support the Bank's new strategic direction.
  - ✓ Purpose: *To rapidly develop agile leaders who can consistently deliver winning results in an increasingly tumultuous global environment*
  - ✓ Components/Phases
    - Phase I – Finding the Passion to Lead
    - Phase II – Breakthrough Problem-Solving (Action Learning)
    - Phase III – Mechanics of Leadership
  - ✓ Inputs
    - 2 WIAL Action Learning Coaches
    - Coaches get buy-in from Executive & HR
    - CEO was problem presenter in demo session to managers
    - Each manager “owned” a problem; sent to Coach for review
    - Diverse Action Learning groups (all employees involved)
    - Accountability session – each manager reported back to group
  - ✓ Results
    - Powerful reframing of problems: *Examples –*
      - *Resource constraints converted to a search for creative ways to use existing resources and networks to achieve required results;*
      - *Non-compliance of beneficiaries changed to finding strategies for more effective stakeholder relations and management*
    - Breakthrough strategies
    - Improved mutual respect *across staff levels & functions*
    - Staff Morale boosted - active involvement of employees previously excluded from such organizational problem-solving sessions (*Voluntary record turnout & participation in Annual Staff Awards Ceremony*)
    - Development of leadership skills by all participants; and
    - Improved leadership practices.
  - ✓ Next
    - Wants to leverage and sustain the value of *Action Learning* as its preferred problem-solving, leadership and team strengthening strategy – Already began to incorporate elements of Action Learning e.g. insightful questioning in meetings and other organizational processes at departmental levels.

- Will also be extending its use to the ECCB's networks within member states of the currency union.
- Support selected employees to be developed as Action Learning Coaches

## Grenada

### ✓ Background

- The Basic Needs Trust Fund (BNTF) is a poverty reduction program funded by the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and the Government of Grenada (GOG). It is a flagship Programme of the Bank and one of many programs of the Government of Grenada pursues to address poverty.
- The Project Manager for the Basic Needs Trust Fund in the Government of Grenada wanted beneficiaries of the projects under the Fund (ministries, community groups etc.), to show greater ownership in the projects to realize their initial intent and facilitate their sustainability.
- As an example, they would provide a building to house a pre-school based on identified need in a community; however, the stakeholders were not following through with the requisite policies, to ensure successful implementation and maintenance of the facility.

### ✓ The Process

- In a bid to address this issue, the Project Manager, posed the question as to; *how to ensure sustainability of the project beyond the Basic Need Trust Fund's input.*
- He sought to have the Action Learning process assist him in coming up with break through strategies, by treating this issue as his leadership development stretch project under the Caribbean Leadership Project.

### ✓ The Results

#### **The Project Manager reported:**

"My LSP is on stream to achieve its objectives. I am confident that with the additional reviews, new insights and redesign, we would achieve sustainability. We have built into the infrastructure type projects, post review after implementation and a check-list. In the case of training projects –tracer studies are being conducted at six months and one-year intervals.

#### **He continues:**

"This journey was a very reflective one. I have been involved in projects for almost twenty years and yet new insight and leaning has been brought to the fore from the process. I have developed a greater appreciation for stakeholders involvement at all stages of the project... I see the AL process as a wonderful learning opportunity to find a solution with the support of the group with their various strengths. There is a tendency to give instructions and recommend solutions, however, this process forces you to listen and rephrase and gain a deeper understanding to help the individual view the issue or

problem from different lenses. The team process also humbles you. Again we feel we know the answers and solutions but we have to respect each other and others' experiences. The application of the AL process is a work in progress for my organization. We still need to build trust and share information. The team still works as individuals that yearn for praise and honor. Our direct report, CDB and beneficiaries have seen the changes and we receive many commendations on our work and approach. This needs to be sustained and encouraged."

## **Barbados**

### ✓ Background

**The Supreme Court of Barbados** and more specifically the Court Process Office, wanted to engage the team in training that would:

- Allow the group to rediscover the positives of the department and of their colleagues.
- Have each person's voice heard
- Enable the group to learn about each other's concerns; and
- Together find solutions.

This they believed would cause the threefold objectives of the training to be realized, which were team building, camaraderie and problem solving.

Action Learning was thus introduced to the Supreme Court as the methodological approach that could best support the outcomes envisaged for their learning intervention. The groups were mixed comprising juniors, middle and senior management.

### ✓ Results

- There was initially some resistance to this format of training – *it's not the norm – the approach did not support the hierarchical structure.*
- However, this did not deter the majority of the staff from enthusiastically participating
- They left the training feeling hopeful of the future of the department.
- One manager said it was extremely productive and he had the opportunity to hear a junior he thought to be a quiet personality reveal passion and clarity in his solutions for the department.
- One middle manager shared that the Action Learning Approach brought to the fore that togetherness promotes production.
- One junior said she wanted to utilize this approach to learning again as it was very beneficial.
- The need to trust the AL process was reinforced.

## **Conclusion**

These practical experiences from the public service of the Caribbean have shown the first steps of successfully moving towards the goal of having a *transformed public sector*. One **that is**

*dynamic, innovative and responsive to the needs of citizens and businesses... is constantly measuring itself, and improving, and sees the citizen as the customers rightly deserving of the very best public services.*

Action Learning is creating value for the public services of the Caribbean. Public officers who have embraced the AL process, recognize its applicability across the different facets of their lives (the organization, home, community).

Additionally, our engagement with Action Learning to date, has brought forcefully to the foreground that individuals wearing the title 'leader', do not have all the answers and will never do. Consequently, the public sector is coming into greater awareness of the need to be a learning organization and for leaders to recognize and leverage the collective value of the Group, doing so with the certain knowledge of just how powerful this is to gaining their support and ownership of change efforts generally, and the illusive public sector transformation more specifically.

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