

Transforming a Region through Action Learning

A central bank is a unique organization and a multi-state central bank even more so, hence the value in having its leadership development program custom-made. The Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB) is the first multi-state central bank in the world, predating the European Central Bank. The major challenge is that the Bank has to coordinate and monitor the financial system and developing economies of its eight member states, six of which are independent nations. So, while striving to be a viable organization, the ECCB is also obligated to ensure that there is balanced growth and economic development in its member states. These member states face the usual vulnerabilities common to small island states as well as the adverse impact of the vagaries of the global financial system.

On assuming the top post at the Bank 18 months ago, the current Governor asked our team to create a leadership development program for ECCB executive and senior managers. He insisted that the program, while it should be guided by sound theory, must be innovative and hands-on, to equip the Bank's leaders to recreate the organization for greater effectiveness over the coming decades. There was additional pressure on our team because ECCB has persuasive influence on banks, financial institutions and the public sector throughout its jurisdiction, so that whatever we created had to be exemplary.



We proposed a three-phase program to be delivered over nine months. Phase I *Finding the Passion to Lead* used psychometric assessments, a range of stimulus material and group projects to engage participants fully in the new leadership thrust. Phase II was Action Learning and in Phase III we covered what we chose to call the *Mechanics of Leadership*.

The Action Learning Phase immersed all staff and managers of ECCB in an intensive and powerful process for leadership development and breakthrough problem-solving. Each manager had to identify a significant problem within their scope of responsibility and for which they have the authority to take action. The problems had to relate directly to the emerging strategic thrust of the organization and were reviewed by the consultants prior to the start of this phase. The consultants determined whether the problems as initially presented were suitable for an Action Learning group. A variety of different problems were presented ranging from resource constraints, coping with increased workloads, dealing with difficult staff behaviors, improving morale to getting cooperation and compliance from external stakeholders.

A random but diverse group of about five (5) ECCB employees was assigned to each manager. During the first session of approximately two hours' duration and held during the week of 5 – 9 December 2016, each manager presented their problem to the group. The group, including the problem presenter, was coached by a WIAL Certified Action Learning Coach to generate

breakthrough solutions while developing their leadership skills. At the end of the first session each manager was required to indicate specific actions that he or she would take as a result of the session. This was followed by a second session in the period from 23 January to 9 March 2017. At this time, the managers reported back to their assigned group on the progress made in keeping with the actions they had committed to at the end of the previous session.

During the first Action Learning session, groups were coached to assist the manager to reframe the problem. In several cases, managers had presented problems that were not within their scope of authority or which did not lend themselves to creative problem-solving of this nature. As an example, managers would list as a problem that they had inadequate staffing. After processing, this problem was frequently reframed to put the onus on the manager to find



creative ways to deliver the required results within the resource constraints or to seek arrangements for augmenting resources available for their work programs.

At the end of that first session, given the support of the group, each manager could clearly state actions that would be taken prior to the second session. At the second session, the manager reported on these actions. With very few exceptions, managers were able to share that they had indeed progressed towards a solution to the owned problem.

Based on spontaneous verbal feedback as well as anecdotal data, all participants seem to have considered the *Action Learning* exercise as being highly beneficial. Benefits cited include:

- mutual respect built across levels and departments of the Bank;
- active involvement of employees previously excluded from such organizational problem-solving sessions;
- improvement of rapport among management and non-management staff of the Bank;
- development of leadership skills by all participants; and

- improved leadership practices.

The Bank's annual staff awards dinner which was held immediately after the first round of Action Learning sessions, was said to have had the greatest level of attendance and active participation ever. Although it is difficult to prove a correlation, our team is of the view that the increased level of staff engagement generated by the Action Learning sessions may have contributed.

When leaders who participated were asked to state what they had learned from the entire leadership development program and how they intended to apply the learning, most cited Action Learning. They stated that they would start using aspects of Action Learning in their everyday work immediately – within the Bank and with stakeholders in member states. These aspects included insightful and reflective questioning, group problem-solving and active listening.

ECCB Chief of Security, Danny Caine wrote: *"The Action learning group segment was vital as it created accountability and heightened the importance of active listening, the collective approach and feedback."*

The Acting Director of the ECCB Human Resource Department, Jolene Newton gave her overall assessment of the Action Learning component of the program as follows:

*"Problem + right environment (questions * coach) = solution
This is the winning formula for any successful institution. The action learning approach is innovative and inclusive. Staff found it invigorating to be given the opportunity to assist managers in solving real problems. Managers learnt of the invaluable resources they have at their disposal and how to readily tap into them. This approach is something that benefits all, making it a win-win approach."*

The ECCB is expected to evaluate the extent to which solutions and the new leadership behaviors have been implemented and the observable impact. From all accounts, Action Learning has had a noticeable impact on the entire organization, and hopefully this will be formally and systematically documented after the evaluation.

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