

## Learning on the Run 2: Outsider Review

How can politicians (or their staff) provide the impetus for public sector change?

The Request. We<sup>1</sup> were asked to help a division of a waste and recycling city utility department downside their outreach staff and shift the function of that section. Management noticed signals that budget, priorities and industry trends dictated a change in strategy toward less residential outreach and more focus on commercial establishments. The key question from leadership evolved into: How to change the outreach function to be more in line with trends and sifting grant money and reduce staff numbers in a way that was both honest and supportive of staff?

Larger Context. Division leadership realized that in the next few years, the entire department would be looking to reduce the budget and staff and they wanted to be out in front of that wave. Outreach staff saw their work as part of the larger mission of resource conservation. Direct communication between these staff and management was lacking; staff were located at a remote site away from the main offices. Given the lack of connection between staff and upper management; it was believed that outreach staff would be highly suspect and resistant to any direction from management.

Consulting Intervention. We realized that involvement and connection were the keys to create a humanistic and fair process for people leaving or changing jobs. We decided on three opening events that would help the whole division realize the issues at hand and consider ways to respond and not simply react.

1. We helped organize a half-day workshop: trends that would impact the work of the department. The leadership choose and invited the presenters. Many of these were respected experts and staff of key city council members. Part of the workshop included informal discussions with each presenter at a different table. The workshops were kept small to maximize influence and interaction. All managers, supervisors and key experts and gate keepers within the division were invited.
2. The division conducted a scenario building session with selected internal staff and management. Using a modified nominal group technique<sup>2</sup>, two different groups developed a best and worst case scenario based on explicit assumptions. Following the report of the scenarios, an all staff planning workshop was held to allow staff to review their functions and staffing requirements (including skills needed) in light of each scenario.
3. A question & answer forum was conducted for outreach staff and management to have a transparent conversation about the future as best they understood it and process they were sponsoring to engage that future. Questions were solicited anonymously through the facilitators. Management was able to review the questions with minimally prepared responses. Questions were read aloud, with follow-ups by the facilitator to give voice to concerns that were apparent.

Last Line. For an honest look at bad news, political staff, scenario building and direct exchange help provide opportunities for change that create the least resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Connor was the co-consultant. She is now with Guiding Leaders and Teams.

<sup>2</sup> See Delbecq A.L. et. a.l. (1975) Group Techniques for Program Planning. Dallas Texas: Scott Foresman & Co.

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