

Navigating USAID in Times of Change: A Leadership Development Case

Scenario

Context

Anna was hired in the fall of 2000 as a senior technical advisor in one of the Bureaus, before USAID's reorganization. Her job description indicated she would provide technical assistance in her area of expertise to various countries. The position would receive overall programmatic guidance from the Director of the Division and together they would work out an annual work plan including anticipated time in the field (TDYs) and vacations.

Anna thought, "This is a great job. I can do all this...I have all this great experience...so that's why I applied. Because I thought it would be really interesting, I wanted to learn about AID, I knew that as a Fellow I'd have a lot of opportunities for training, theoretically."

Anna possessed many years of field experience in various areas of health and development. She brought a very enthusiastic yet matter-of-fact approach to her work.

Anna began working at the USAID offices in the Ronald Reagan Building (RRB), a high-interrupt environment where the daily schedule often includes many meetings as well interactions with in-country counterparts requiring accurate advice and thoughtful guidance.

In this challenging work context, Anna defined leadership as, "people trying to push things forward, to move them along. But it seems that for every step that they might take forward, there are two back and so it is very hard to really

see that. And I think that mostly I've seen that there is a lack of leadership..." She felt the work context demanded strong communication and information-sharing, but that the leadership failed to create and support an environment "conducive to gathering information."

Shortly after being hired, in August 2001, USAID announced sector-focused portfolio reviews and an agency reorganization of pillar bureaus. The major implication to the Regional Bureaus (Africa, Asia and the Near East, Europe and Eurasia and Latin America and the Caribbean) was that they would be cut back to serve as the primary conduit by which Missions communicate and coordinate with USAID [in Washington]. Most technical staff were placed in functional pillar bureaus (Global Health, DHCA, EGAT) with a small core of technical staff retained among the Regional Bureaus.

Dilemma

While new to USAID, Anna noted the hierarchy of personnel, reporting chains and approvals and the effect that this had during the reorganization process on both the coordination and structure in reporting and communication processes as well as her colleagues' priorities and communication styles. As the reorganization progressed, Anna observed a typical phenomenon in any organizational restructuring - that people, through word or deed, expressed their resistance to change and their desire to maintain their positions.

After spending over a year going through the reorganization Anna found the job she was hired to do had "morphed into something else," and Anna found that the nature of her position became significantly more administrative. Anna's 2002-2003 work plan objectives started with, "provide backstopping and coordinate support for..." "improve communication..." and "facilitate the work of..."

"A lot of the things we were hired for, because of our incredible technical backgrounds and field experience, are really...maybe I use not even 10% of that because the job has become so administrative."

Over the 2001-2002 period, Anna officially had four different supervisors. During this time, Anna felt a lack of guidance and feedback from superiors that she perceived was a result of both of the organizational culture and the change in her work from the reorganization. Inattention from supervisors and informal reporting and feedback processes meant it was difficult for her to know how she was being evaluated: "[E]very time you get a new supervisor, you've got to get them up to speed and they have other ideas... I have been told, 'You're not traveling enough.' Then it changes, 'you're traveling too much,' then back to 'you're not traveling enough,' etcetera. During this time, my first year into my second, I was trying to get trained in order to do my job better. It was very frustrating."

Anna's frustration with the changes in her work focus and the reorganization process demanded new "leadership skills while making certain personal commitments in a dynamic environment of responding to international needs in a governmental setting."

Interventions

Of several interventions Anna experienced in 2001-2002 (see table), the skill/knowledge-specific trainings provided by USAID and PLP and one-on-one coaching were most important to her. PLP's online journaling complemented these by allowing her to track milestones, and document ideas, lessons learned, and key events for the future. In-house development activities offered by USAID, as well as short-term training sessions in the D.C. office of PLP enhanced Anna's capability to do her work by strengthening her understanding of USAID's strategic planning process, acquisition, assistance and procurement processes.

"The CTO trainings, such as Acquisition and Assistance Management, or similar, things that a Fellow really needs to know, because you can make very very serious errors if you don't. Those courses have been really useful in my work. I didn't really see how I could be of much help to other people and really give high quality technical assistance to the Missions when I didn't understand USAID's strategic planning and procurement processes. The Missions ask for TA with Strategic Plans and I thought, well, shouldn't I be trained first?"

Anna stated about working with her certified coach, a USAID retiree, that,

"it's been really, really helpful for my professional development...Dealing with...questions in the institution...she knows it all. And she knows everybody and she knows all the acronyms as well as the processes and politics."

Anna's coach recommended she read specific books. She was able to do this on her own time and it enhanced her understanding of change and how to manage it more successfully. She in turn shared her new knowledge with others, enhancing the work environment for herself and for others – a good indicator that she is developing as a leader.

Outcomes

Through coaching and skill trainings, Anna received guidance to work more efficiently and effectively in the institution, and this led to her adaptation to the context of a complex government bureaucracy. Over time Anna's personal commitments changed—she became less emotionally entrenched in day-to-day tasks and this led to a feeling of "less passion about the work. And in some ways that is good. I think because before I was very emotionally tied into my job and ...this to me is just a job. It's not a matter of life and death."

Importantly, Anna sought support where she needed it: from PLP support staff (for office supplies, etc.) and from her coach on questions of professional development, "where do I want to go from here...what do I want to get out of it?" and institutional guidance about history, processes, politics and how to use and navigate these.

Evolving Commitments

Through coaching and online journaling, Anna became attuned to the political realities of the work, not only as it affected her, but also how it affected those at the highest levels of the agency.

This understanding allowed her to detach herself from some of the chaos in the agency after the reorganization, and to take a longer-

Leadership Development Intervention Descriptions	
Intervention	Purpose
E-Mail Principles and Etiquette	To improve e-mail communication by identifying clear writing style, providing effective ways of dealing with common concerns, and presenting techniques to improve each section of an e-mail.
Annual Leadership Retreat (2001)	To provide development experiences that enabled me to realize my own leadership capabilities in order to practice practical leadership at USAID.
Sexuality Training	To train members of the IGWG and interested USAID staff on how to discuss issues of sexuality.
Making Time to Make a Difference	To support staff to more effectively organize their work time and to prioritize their work to accomplish their most important work goals.
Gender and PHN Programs: Issues, Approaches, and Tools	To strengthen skills for integrating gender into USAID population and health projects and programs.
Risk –Taking for Leaders in a Time of Change	Enable participants to identify the risk-taking that they must address in their work and develop risk management strategies that maximize success.
Knowledge Sharing for Technical Results	To introduce a presentation design that allows for greater audience participation and a more targeted approach that matches solutions to challenges. Training for SOTA presenters.
One-on-One Coaching Bi-weekly for 1 hour for 3 months; then 2-3 meetings/phone conversations	To help fellows receive the support and guidance needed to succeed in their position by matching them with experienced senior staff members at USAID and PLP.
On-line Journaling	To serve as a tool for personal development by providing an opportunity to write and reflect on on-the-job experiences and noteworthy leadership moments, identify accomplishments and assess personal leadership, management and technical growth.

term perspective and to weigh her own professional development goals with her work goals.

Anna translated these personal commitments into improving her surrounding work environment. By working on her ability to communicate with others and demonstrating a willingness to help and advise as "part of the informal network," she shared learning with others and served as a role model. She found, as a result of using an informal network, that she was also better able to give technical assistance to the Missions. Her appreciation of multiple motives, political agendas, resource constraints and accountability requirements of government-funded global health programs boosted the ability of her groups to build and maintain important relationships across settings and cultures. Colleagues identified Anna as a leader in putting together a system for missions to know whom in AID/W has skills and may be able to provide assistance. A better system had been needed for a long time and Anna had taken the initiative to find a system that would work.

While respecting the hierarchical communication customs of USAID, Anna did not let formality get in the way of finding answers for challenges facing the field offices she supported. By helping a cooperating agency (CA) to understand AID policy, the CA was in turn able to guide their discussions with other NGOs in the region

to resolve a problematic situation. She was also commended for gaining the respect and trust of a top government official in a target country, which enabled that country's field mission staff to do their jobs better.

Anna's commitment to international health is strong, though she is cognizant of the challenges of continuing to develop her career within the USAID system.

On a PLP leadership self-assessment, Anna indicated 11 behaviors she felt she had improved between Fall 2001 and Fall 2002. Although these changes can not be directly attributed to leadership development interventions provided by PLP and USAID, it is likely that these interventions played at least some part in closing gaps between actual and ideal leadership. Anna stated she improved the following behaviors, which were consistent with her description of her context, dilemmas and actions to date:

Conclusions

In a dynamic environment of responding to international needs in a governmental setting, the USAID reorganization, coupled with the new paradigm for international development, dispersed energy of both supervisors and Fellows. Anna's resulting frustration with the bureaucracy called for her changing certain personal commitments and the practice of specific leadership skills. Many of these skills and

Evaluation Sources/References

The purpose of PLP's case studies is 1) to document PLP's contribution to project strategic objectives and intermediate results, and 2) to determine outcomes and indicators of leadership development interventions through context-bound cases. Case participants names and other identifying information have been changed. PLP's EvaluLEAD Framework is used to organize and report outcomes based on evidential and evocative approaches in reference to PLP's Results Framework and Integrated Leadership Framework. Sources for the evaluation included:

- Curriculum Vitae;
- Job description and scope of work;
- Background material on USAID including recent news releases and two previous evaluations conducted by PLP to assess support;
- Administrative Services Survey of active Fellows;



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- I act in ways that build others' respect for me.
- I specify the importance of having a strong sense of purpose.
- I talk about my most important values and beliefs.
- I get others to look at problems from many different angles.
- I help others to develop their strengths.
- I discuss, in specific terms, who is responsible for achieving performance targets.
- I show that I am a firm believer in "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."
- I demonstrate that problems must become chronic before I take action.
- I get others to do more than they expected to do.
- I am effective in meeting others' job-related needs.
- I am effective in meeting organizational requirements.

commitments are among essential leadership qualities that can be addressed by leadership development interventions. Anna was able to use some of her existing skills, abilities and competencies for the job and also gain critical contributions from PLP to navigate successfully and produce results for the organization.

- Anna's assessed performance from 360 degree performance review (2002) and pre/post results of an MLQ (Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire) conducted before and after a Leadership Conference she attended as part of a cohort group in the Fall of 2001;
- Transcripts produced and analyzed from a conversation held in August 2002 between Anna and a researcher to gain insights into her context and experiences.

Evaluators

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