

Project Partners

HRD-NB

The Department of Human Resources Development really completed the project because of its vision and leadership, as well as its openness to change. In fact, the Department shared with all personnel a vision of the future of HRD-NB that inspired every participant, a very precise mission statement, and clear objectives to gain their backing for the project. The steadfast support of the Premier, the Minister, the Deputy Minister and senior Department officials was greatly appreciated and helped with getting through hard times. The fact that only one rather than several departments was involved allowed for clearly defined leadership and relatively easy decision making. Department employees were also very open-minded about the proposed changes and really wanted to help the people who were their clients. The project was not seen as a simple effort to generate revenue or save money. Shared objectives along with a high degree of employee commitment and dedication facilitated progress with the project. It should be pointed out that, from the outset, regional personnel had been part of the work teams. Although the project got blown off course a few times along the way, it always managed to get back on track.

HRD-NB personnel had an excellent knowledge of their field, i.e., social services and the imperatives of service delivery. They could imagine any sort of scenario that might affect the calculation of social benefits. They also cared about their clients' best interests and clearly saw that their job was to provide swift and efficient aid for people in a crisis. HRD-NB had a very clear understanding of the realities of poverty and its psychological and social implications.

Through the partnership project with Andersen/Accenture (A/A), HRD-NB could tap into a broad pool of expertise via the subcontractors engaged by its partners — resources the Department did not have. Its alliance with a private partner also gave it much more legal leeway because the Department gained access to expertise and know-how that its personnel lacked, particularly in project management and managing change, without hiring staff.

Andersen/Accenture

A/A personnel had tremendous technological expertise, along with a solid mastery of project-management tools and means. They also possessed the knowledge required to manage work processes: they knew how to come up with good business solutions. Their employees were particularly skilled in using software for presentations, leading groups and quickly finding documentation. Moreover, the firm had access to extensive external resources through subcontracting. Its staff was also very young, brimming with energy and, above all, highly productive. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

Thus the private partner had all the human and financial resources, along with the expertise required to make the project a success, which it did. But in the opinion of Department officials(2), A/A underestimated the magnitude of the project, which itself was poorly understood by the firm's management. The project's lack of internal visibility apparently had some effect on the allocation of the human and technical resources required for the project. Some members of management failed to understand that there was no ready-made solution to the Department's problems, and a custom-made one had to be created. Others were reluctant to allocate resources to a project with no guaranteed revenue, because the formula for performance-based contracts was unfamiliar or unknown. This led to numerous changes in project management on the private partner's side. The manager at HRD-NB had to deal with as many as four counterparts from A/A. The project too suffered from the high turnover rate in A/A personnel: a lot of knowledge acquired along the way was lost and additional costs had to be incurred for the outside experts to stay longer.

Unions and Employees

Transformation of the Department resulted in one union losing some 200 members while another gained about 75 with the new case-manager positions. To avoid excessive union pressure, the management team made sure the unions were always informed of upcoming decisions before their members so that they could claim some control over the situation. The unions might easily block the project agenda by filing complaints or grievances with the Labour Board. This is what the management team wanted to avoid by maintaining good communications with the unions, frequently consulting them and treating the laid-off employees generously.

Nonetheless, the resistance to change of some HRD-NB staff members, and the anxiety and nervousness created by the uncertainty or loss of a job were negative psychological factors that were difficult to eliminate from

a project the size of the Alliance for Change. Nearly all employees were replaced, trained or assigned to positions in keeping with their skills. In general, jobs were enriched and salaries increased. All this unfolded rather smoothly. The two unions were sold on the advantages of this type of project for their members and were involved at every stage of the reorganization by upholding and protecting the rights of their membership.

Beneficiaries

At first, social assistance beneficiaries didn't want to hear any talk of change; they did not want intrusions into their privacy nor to be forced to find a job. They were afraid of losing their social benefits. They also complained about not having enough access to managers, and not being treated fairly or equitably.

To make its clients aware and inform them of its objectives, HRD-NB had to work on changing their attitudes and convincing them of the value of the project and the longer-term benefits they stood to gain. The Department organized information sessions and public consultations, individual and group meetings with clients, and mail surveys. Case managers kept their clients informed of the project's progress. Letters explaining the format and details on the new cheques were sent to clients and, during the first weeks of the pilot project, a hotline for answering questions was maintained by seven or eight employees. Subsequently, a team was created to oversee the cheque delivery.

(2) A/A Representatives refused to allow their employees to participate in this study; the views expressed therefore reflect the perceptions of HRD-NB officials.