

# Collaboration

## Collaborative Mechanisms

Collaboration by the partners was based on a joint teams approach. Some 140 people worked on the project: 40% were HRD-NB and 60% A/A employees. The number of participants fluctuated with the arrival and departure of experts hired as subcontractors. To speed up communications, all participants were clustered in what they called "the war room," which is where the entire project unfolded. The two partners were present on every team, day after day, and attended all the meetings. For example, the design of the income screen involved case officers from HRD-NB and computer specialists from A/A.

The project was co-managed by the two partners. Among other tasks, the HRD-NB manager had to make sure their private-sector counterpart received all the necessary information about the Department to be able to make informed decisions. Aside from the project-management team, other key teams were formed for managing change, policies and procedures, product testing and verification, operating system and information technology (IT). HRD-NB used the following selection criteria for project personnel: a natural inclination towards change, excellent mastery of an area of expertise, and effective team player.

Steady communication, both vertical and horizontal, was established for the full length of the project. Information flowed quickly from the Minister's Office to the smallest regional branch, between team members and between teams. Thus the presence of regional personnel on every team kept the regions in the loop as the project unfolded. This initiative also provided the benefit of input from employees, who were very familiar with their clientele and occasionally could seek their views. The champions of change therefore played a key role in conveying information and collecting feedback. HRD-NB project team members underscored the ability of A/A experts to explain the complicated issues to the uninitiated at the Department and, within the teams, to relay the knowledge acquired by the old experts to newcomers. Thus, right at the outset, a team of four or five A/A representatives traveled around the Province to consult the regional offices and explain the project. And the team included Francophones, at least bilingual members, which surely made a difference in French-speaking regions. A/A personnel were generally capable of putting themselves on the same level as their partners and explaining to them whatever they did not know. They steadily coached and guided them through every stage, with a great deal of patience for the technical and technological ignorance of Department personnel, and never made them feel incompetent or inept.

At times, the differences between the partners' attitudes and cultures became more pronounced and interfered with communication. In a private company, employees have to carry out decisions as swiftly and efficiently as possible; at the Department, every employee concerned by a decision had their say. Seniority and experience were important, not just competence or theoretical knowledge. Unfortunately, for the first meeting on managing change, A/A dispatched a recently graduated very young employee to explain what change was to HRD-NB personnel with over 20 years of experience. The meeting had to be reheld! Despite these occasional snags, HRD-NB emphasized their partner's kindness, flexibility and sensitivity to their needs and requirements.

Nonetheless, the complexity and slowness of the decisionmaking process in the public sector, and the obligation of departmental accountability set by the government, were a constant irritant for the private partner. Given the numerous levels of approval in the public sector — Department, Minister, Cabinet, Premier — some decisions were slow in coming and any political pressure exerted to speed up the process was in vain. For a firm where decisionmaking power is concentrated at the executive level, it was hard to understand and accept the government machinery, and every delay had a negative impact on both project costs and the partner's patience. Moreover, the latter was completely unprepared to have its actions and statements closely scrutinized by the media. They learned the rules of transparency and access to information the hard way. After a few media gaffes, the Department became the sole spokesperson for the project, yet always defended Andersen.

## Managing Change

Managing change was the project's main challenge. This was the most important aspect of the project, on which the Deputy Minister worked closely with the two co-managers. The managing change team was divided into two groups, one in charge of the human resources agenda and the other responsible for the employee training program. The former had a broader mandate: articulate the vision of the project, develop a communications plan, create the team of champions of change, and manage employee classification, migration, staffing and union relations.

The "champions of change" concept which came from A/A was very effectively used during the project. The champions of change were drawn from field personnel, one from each of the 21 regional offices and, if possible,

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selected by consensus by their colleagues based on the following criteria: trustworthiness, credibility, communication skills and enthusiasm for change. They travelled to Fredericton every three months. Presentations were prepared to inform them of the latest developments with the project. The Deputy Minister and team managers came to talk to them. Individual meetings were arranged to discuss specific regional problems. A direct line was installed for them. Aside from the work done by the champions of change, other means were used to keep Department personnel informed: memos, surveys, roadmaps, videos, posters, brochures and a direct line.

Project participants also played a vital role. Their strong commitment and enthusiasm got them through the tough, painful times. There were always some who hung in there and never gave up hope when the project was bogged down. At a time when other A/A projects were running into problems, the Alliance for Change partners decided that they would fight to the very end to make the project a success, and made a point of making that clear to the firm's management.

The fact of working side by side, every day, throughout the project fostered a spirit of helping one another and mutual understanding. This gave participants a chance to get to know each other well, both personally and professionally. Sharing the same living space also reinforced cooperation; it was virtually impossible not to settle differences when rubbing shoulders every day. The partners from the private and public sectors adjusted to each other to such an extent that it was hard to tell them apart. But it wasn't always this way.

In fact, three A/A managers in succession were appointed during the project's first year. Their problems adapting to the public domain and, more specifically to social services, largely compromised smooth progress with the project. A/A 'human resource experts' were summoned to the rescue when the two partners were unable to work together. Andersen tried to impose ready-made ideas on the procedure to follow and failed to understand HRD-NB's mission of serving the needy. There is a big difference between developing a complex computer system and delivering a public service. The firm claimed to be an expert in managing change, but at the outset had played down the cultural change required of some Departmental personnel as well as clients. Moreover, the internal support and recognition given to its own employees left something to be desired. For instance, the firm had a tendency, at any time whatsoever, to pull people with a very good knowledge of HRD-NB operations out of the project and replace them with others totally unfamiliar with the organization. Conference calls with the firm's experts were no substitute for their on-site presence, which on numerous occasions created problems. It was the fourth manager appointed by Andersen who succeeded in getting the project back on the right track. This individual, considered very strict, knew how to make the necessary decisions to bring the project under control, both at the Department and A/A, even if it meant stepping on a few toes. Despite tensions, he kept the focus on change.

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