



Managing Strategic Change at The Environment Agency

The Client

The Environment Agency is an independent public body that provides environmental protection and improvement in England and Wales through a combination of prevention, education and ultimately enforcement. It employs 11,000 staff.

Two years ago the Agency appointed a new Chief Executive and kicked off a major review of its strategy and the way in which it was working to achieve that strategy. For some time the Agency had had a growing suspicion internally that it was beginning to drift away from achieving its business objectives. The process of articulating what the Agency was about, combined with the fresh perspective of the new Chief Executive, served to confirm their initial suspicion.

The Senior Management Team embarked on an ambitious change programme aimed at re-focusing the resources of the organisation around its key strategic objectives. They were also convinced that the Agency needed to be much more positive in promoting its role to the outside world. Critically, they decided that the onus for flying the Agency flag should rest on the shoulders of the managers in the field. These were the people who regularly talked to the general public, liaised with the business community and visited schools and universities.

The Challenge

The Agency's staff need to shoulder responsibilities on environmental issues as diverse as tyre burning and flood defences, performing an equally broad range of functions, from education, publishing, and business liaison to enforcement. Faced with such a varied working environment, the Senior Management Team recognised that there was no prescriptive one-size-fits-all solution. The challenge was to change fundamental attitudes of staff towards the way that they carried out their duties, in a way that would apply across a whole range of work-related situations. The first step in the plan was to initiate the change with a clear message and an invitation to all managers to get to grips with the change proposition.

Why OPDC?

Having recognised that it would need some outside help to initiate a sea change in the Agency's culture, the project was put out to tender and OPDC was eventually appointed. "We chose OPDC because of their flexibility", says Barbara Busby, the Environment Agency's Organisational Development Manager. "They had a set of tools that we felt we

would be able to incorporate into what we wanted to do. We were much more comfortable with this than with the idea of buying an off-the-shelf two-day programme. We were also impressed by the amount of time and effort OPDC put into understanding us.”

The Intervention

Both parties agreed that the project should be approached on a partnership basis and OPDC worked alongside the Agency to design a series of transition workshops. The workshops had two objectives. Firstly, to introduce staff to the organisation’s new strategic direction and new structure and, secondly, to prepare managers to adapt to their new roles and the different demands that these organisational changes would entail.

OPDC devised a three-stage process. Stage 1 addressed what changes in culture and behaviour would be required to implement the new strategy. In Stage 2 these behavioural attitudes were matched with the Agency values that they sprang from. Finally, in Stage 3, these became the focus for the design of the workshops.

The workshops that OPDC devised concentrated on each manager’s development at both individual and functional level. One of the most important issues that the workshops addressed was the issue common to Agency managers across the board, i.e. how to embrace change. OPDC encouraged managers to think about change generically, to analyse where they had experienced it in the past and how they had adapted to it, and to project their conclusions to their current situation.

The Outcome

As a result of the OPDC intervention, the Environment Agency’s managers developed an understanding of the business rationale for change, and of the skills needed for building new relationships across internal functions and with other organisations. The effectiveness of the approach is a source of great satisfaction to Barbara Busby.

“We wanted our managers to be more proactive and to understand their role and responsibilities in embracing change as opposed to sitting there waiting to be told what to do and what not to do. They have now taken responsibility on for managing change at the next level down; and now that everybody has embraced the concept of change they are much more able to accept it when they are told that their role is going to be different without having to go back to square one every time”.