

Chapter 25

Defining Technology Challenges to Growth of an International Non–Governmental Organization (NGO): A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This case study addresses the emerging need for technology-focused development for an international humanitarian organization whose mission is to further community sustainability and citizen empowerment through agricultural and animal husbandry projects. This case study, based on a multi-method needs assessment conducted in both the US headquarters as well as abroad, explores how the organization might address issues of growth and program sustainability throughout the fifty-one countries on five continents where the organization maintains programs by focusing on the development of technology support systems in its country programs.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of accelerated, unrelenting change, organizations in both private and public sectors are grappling with managing environmental and organizational shifts. Gundling (2010) sees a new global competitive order evolving where

companies will compete “with everyone from everywhere for everything” (p. 34). He predicts that employees will need a global mindset where they will be “working with virtual team members, with a diverse workforce at home as well as when traveling abroad” (p.50). Technology development has become an increasingly common adaptation

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response to demographic and industrial change. This study examines the role that technology played in enabling an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that specializes in community sustainability and empowerment to meet the challenges associated with organizational growth, leadership, and cultural complexity. Using mixed methods, a team of university consultants assessed the organization's leadership capacity and discovered that its program effectiveness was severely hampered by gaps and inconsistencies in technology infrastructure, training, and servicing of country program requests. The consulting team also found that the organization's leadership, oblivious to these gaps, was hobbled in its ability to effectively anticipate and manage the change inherent in the organization's ongoing expansion and cultural diversity. The following sections present results of a global needs assessment conducted electronically, focus groups held at leadership development workshops on three continents, and face-to-face interviews held at the NGO headquarters in the U.S.

BACKGROUND

Within a ten-year period, an international NGO evolved from a "family community" where individuals had unlimited access to the CEO into an enterprise that had "corporate components." Organizational growth forced the CEO to be less visible in daily operations and eroded the sense of family for the cadre of incumbents who had experienced the organization's pre-growth familial culture. A tension developed between incumbent and new employees, and the relationship between headquarters (HQ) and "the field" became more complex. Given cultural differences and geographic separateness, the NGO's field directors advocated for increased autonomy regarding decisions that affected their country programs. In contrast, HQ managers added policies, reporting duties, and training requirements to which field

staff had to abide. Those burdensome charges, coupled with a distant HQ staff, many having no first-hand field experience, amplified the divide between the two organization segments.

Values

While the NGO was guided by a board of directors and a senior leadership team, the organization's founding values influenced all programmatic and institutional decisions. Those values honor individual wisdom and collective decision-making, and look to build sustainable community capacity. Organizational values were reinforced by messages that were prominently displayed on the organization's physical structure, in its internal documents, and in its marketing material. The founding values have been institutionalized and used as benchmarks against which all plans, decisions, and activities are measured.

Under the CEO's leadership, the NGO was transformed from a cash-strapped enterprise into a financially sound organization that expanded its community enhancement projects and initiated new global programs. Ironically, the organization's success in attracting corporate and private donations that allowed it to expand its assistance to developing communities also created a strain on the leadership's ability to manage its own internal growth.

As its employee base surged, the organization outgrew its physical location. As a result, employees were spread among three separate locations within a three-mile radius. That physical separation combined with additional bureaucratic protocols constricted spontaneous, informal meetings, and inhibited cross-segment collaboration within the organization. Many newer hires, including managers and supervisors, never met nor were introduced to the CEO—a cultural rite of passage for employees during the organization's formative years. The dichotomous split between new and long-term employees created opposing camps in the organization, polarizing the workplace. By

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