

Strategy for synergies within the Secretariat

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to consider the strategy developed by the Secretary General to maximize synergies within the Secretariat and to advise for further action.

Background

1. In response to Decision SC41-37, the Secretary General initiated a course of action, requesting all staff members to involve themselves in a process to develop and adopt a Strategy to maximize synergies within the Secretariat and to report the outcome to the Standing Committee.

Methodology

2. Instead of employing a one-day event, the whole Secretariat agreed to embark on a comprehensive and inclusive process, including a key step in September 2010, resulting in continued organizational improvements called “Ramsar Staff Advance”.
3. In this process, one of the Secretary General’s guiding principles was to strengthen the efficiency of the Secretariat through sincere teamwork that enhances the possibility to delegate responsibilities to staff members who share a common vision of the future and are united in their pursuit of that vision.
4. Recognizing that it is important to be able to distribute power to those who are skilled and committed on our common vision, the Secretary General decided to better understand and develop our strengths instead of concentrating on our shortcomings and complaining about weaknesses. As a result, all staff members agreed to work as a team with an external facilitator who can help identify these strengths.
5. To help the Ramsar staff members discover their talents, the facilitator introduced and used an online assessment called the “StrengthsFinder”. All staff members gave a positive response and used this new tool to discover their strengths. This process was initiated with the assistance of an external facilitator, Ms Gillian Martin Mehers, Director, Head of Learning, Bright Green Learning @Atadore SARL. We take this opportunity to express our appreciation and thanks to Ms Martin Mehers, who provided valuable and efficient assistance.

The Process

6. The Ramsar “Staff Advance” process – an organizational development initiative – was launched in June 2010. It featured a set of preparatory steps aimed at helping staff contribute to the design of the agenda and key discussion areas for a 1-day face-to-face event and follow-up. These preparatory steps included: 1) a guided discussion at the 7 July

staff meeting to identify strategic questions to be answered; 2) an online survey which collected reflections from staff on a summary set of these questions; 3) a set of individual face-to-face conversations with staff members interested in contributing in this way; and 4) consultation and circulation of the programme for any feedback prior to the event.

Objectives of the Process

7. The resulting Ramsar “Staff Advance” key step was held on 2 September 2010 and had as its main objectives to provide the Secretariat team with:
 - an open space for structured reflection on a number of key work processes;
 - an opportunity to explore team members’ strengths and insights into working with them across the team; and
 - a process for joint generation of suggestions and further actions.

Results and Reflections

8. The Secretariat team expressed a need to have a productive and practical Staff Advance process and to create an environment where everyone could contribute openly to the discussion. Feedback on the day of the key discussion suggested that this environment was created, and that good progress was made in understanding a number of the issues that the team is facing. Discussion included how these might be treated through a number of considered actions. The team felt that the Advance needed to be followed up by a road map and plan beyond the retreat to keep the momentum of the day and its discussions.
9. Meetings are one of the main tools the team uses for collaborative work and internal communication. Staff meetings in particular are regular opportunities for the team to meet, develop shared understanding of one another’s work, and exchange thoughts and opinions. Making these as productive as possible was one of the opportunities the team saw to further improve its practice. Communication more generally was another priority selected for further work. The team developed a set of practical suggestions for change in these areas¹.
10. Suggestions for the staff meetings included the collective development of a set of norms and procedures that could help to ensure productivity in these meetings, as well as techniques to encourage all staff members to participate and engage meaningfully. When staff meetings (and meetings in general) are most effective they can produce greater clarity on work tasks, roles and responsibilities, and opportunities for prioritisation of activities. These norms will be used for observation and discussion to help the group learn good practice in staff meetings, which could be applied to other meetings within Ramsar and outside. With a strong strength of “Learner” in the staff, this process could provide an interesting peer-learning opportunity. (Note: This idea was further developed in follow-up to the Staff Advance in a staff meeting on 1 October.)
11. Suggestions for communication included practice in using the three official languages of Ramsar and helping to support engagement through this and through consideration of the diversity of language and communication styles of the team members. When English is

1 See also full report: *Summary Report of the Workshop*, 2 September 2010, Chateau de Bossey

used, clarity, speed, and brevity are among the values suggested by team members. Language which supports respect, deep listening, genuine curiosity at differences in opinion, and asking questions to develop understanding can all be practiced as communication techniques.

12. The StrengthsFinder activity gave us a good understanding of the perceived strengths of each staff member, and we now have comprehensive tables highlighting our strengths, individually and as a team. The results produced a number of interesting follow-up ideas, including sharing the tips sheets visually in the office as well as the Team Strengths map and working to incorporate discussion of the Strengths into small group work and meetings, or even in coaching environments. It was important to underline the fact that all team members have all the 34 strengths, and that the online questionnaire simply identifies those that feature in the top five for each person at the time he or she is answering the questions. Small group discussions during the Staff Advance showed that, for most people, top Strengths were observable in team members in the office and that opportunities could be created to help people contribute even more of their strengths to the team's work. Overall people liked the StrengthsFinder exercise, finding it insightful and thought-provoking at the personal, as well as in the whole team and small group, contexts. (Note: As a result of this discussion, an induction exercise for new staff members involving the StrengthsFinder instrument has been developed by the team and is currently being tested by new team members.)
13. The Staff Advance initial step took a full day, a tiring day, and ended with people being positively reflective – with the hope that the good ideas and the energy around change would and could be maintained upon return to the office and over time. How this momentum could be kept was a question on many minds. People seemed proud of the openness of the team members to deal with some issues for which trust was needed and granted. Getting out of the office was greatly appreciated, and the logistics helped support this, according to the feedback survey. Ideas for how to incorporate more informal activities amongst team members were amongst the products of one of the work groups. Staff reflected that this day showed how well the members can work together as a team, being considerate of individual styles, as well as how easy it is in situations of time pressure, stress and possible lack of clarity to fall back into traditional patterns of work and communication.
14. It was suggested that Staff Advance meetings be held regularly (annually or bi-annually), as well as working on next actions in the interim, to keep the process active.

Fundamental principles of the Strategy and operational organization to implement the Strategy

15. Keeping up the momentum in the process is important, and having internal champions for some of the key pieces (individuals or small teams) is key to keeping the ownership in the team. These process leader people need to be vested with the support of the team to do this work, and time must be allocated to this end, as well as time for reporting and engaging the rest of the team in meetings (e.g., the staff meetings).
16. Following the development and adoption of the norms for meetings, it has been interesting to have them externally facilitated several times to help the team practice using the norms. At the same time, the team is identifying staff members who have an interest in

group process to take on the role of shadow for the facilitator, and then as process observers, with an express role to support the continued practice of the norms. They are given a few minutes at the beginning of each meeting to remind the group of the norms it is using, and then at the end to lead a discussion to reflect on the meeting and make suggestions for the next meeting. A checklist has been developed to help them and the team. This has also been a rotating position, and it is practiced regularly in order to be most useful for change.

17. To follow up on the StrengthsFinder activity, it is important to try to integrate this learning into different kinds of teamwork, at all levels (small and large groups). It can potentially be used by individuals with their line managers as a part of the performance assessment process, as a way to discuss personal contributions to the team. It can also be used in individual management/leadership coaching, which might be interesting for some team members holding these types of positions. For example, short (e.g., 30-minute) individual sessions might be productive ways to talk through the implications of their strengths for individual members and the additional opportunities their strengths might present, as well as a way to reflect on the synergies amongst team members. This might also be useful for pairs or trios who work closely together to explore further what their strengths, synergistically, might mean.
18. This process of change in the work environment and in some central team processes needs champions, and at least in the initial stages might need external support (in terms of supporting the champions and change ideas). It might be interesting for some staff members to explore how their personal leadership/management styles impact the team and how they can be most effective, to design for themselves an individual “learning journey” that might include external training, coaching and structured reflective practice.
19. The Secretariat remains hopeful that this process will continue to improve synergies within the Secretariat to better serve the Contracting Parties.