

THE ROAD TO

By Ken Flemmer, Bureau Chief for Evaluation and Program Quality Support, ADRA
Photo by Ken Flemmer

A few years ago I attended a symposium for internal auditors. It soon became clear that most of the attendees were from very powerful corporations with impressive compensations to match. There were only a few, like myself, attending from the NGO world. There were very interesting insights shared on a wide range of issues and challenges facing the internal auditors present. One recurring topic was recruiting and retaining quality high performing staff. A couple of days into the symposium the facilitator turned to me and asked me to share what it is like to audit inside an NGO.





SUCCESS

I shared that we often find ourselves implementing programs in the most corrupt situations on the globe and that the donors who support us expect activities and accounting to be of a very high standard. I further shared that it often is a never ending struggle to maintain strong internal controls over accounting, staff behavior, and activity reporting.

I ended my short impromptu presentation mentioning that over the past two days I had been monitoring a situation in a

country where staff had come under gunfire traveling to a village and had spent the last two days trying to figure out how to leave without another attack. This caused a stir and one participant blurted, "How do you find people to work for you?" I did not have to ponder and ask for a bit of time to deeply reflect as I already had the answer. "There are always a group of people who deeply believe they can make the world a better place - that is who we hire."

Staff quality is the foundation to quality in programs. An NGO needs to hire the best drivers, accountants, field promoters, or project managers. Once hired these staff need to be managed well. In NGO safety and security circles it is well understood, "Good staff, well managed, are a major security asset. Good staff, poorly managed, can be a serious security risk!" One can conclude that a high performing logistics operation will not only require good staff but will require solid and robust systems and internal controls. Systems that support and encourage the highest degree of ethics and transparency.

not only help staff resist "temptation" but design systems that "lead to virtuous behavior." Zimbardo suggests that the issue is not "bad apples" but with the "barrel makers", the leaders who maintain systems in which staff are not encouraged to high performance.

There are many organizational forces that hamper the capacity to innovate, solve problems, achieve results and compete in the marketplace. In the often complicated humanitarian setting a robust flow of information and ideas is required to

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Another key element is "team". Three years ago ADRA engaged an intern over the summer months. This individual was given nine midterm and final/ impact program evaluations of ADRA primary health programs. These evaluations covered several years and countries. The assignment was basic. Study these reports and look for patterns, trends, issues that show up when these reports are studied at "one sitting". One of the key learnings from this exercise; if there is tension and discord within the project or with administration, there will be lower performance of the program. Program results are diminished. Tensions and poor team performance inject unhealthy levels of "politics" and consume much of the creativity and energy of the staff, leaving little to invest in program quality. There will be no time to keep on the "cutting edge". There will be little ability to focus on new and emerging initiatives.

The June 2009 Harvard Business Review had a short fascinating article, "Why good people do bad things". After reviewing well known atrocities from My Lia to Abu Ghraib, Psychologist Philip Zimbardo concluded that because behavior is so strongly influenced by situational forces, it is essential that leaders create systems and situations that

sustain excellence, performance and sustainable success. Views and opinions must be encouraged. This will result in an NGO that has high ethics and programs that produce impressive results.

With this conceptual framework ADRA utilizes a set of tools to initiate systems and structure and review if the systems deliver the results desired.

When starting a new larger multiyear project a small team will join the ADRA field team to set up a range of systems needed for program delivery. This includes refining the indicators for progress and success, determining what data will be collected and how, why collecting data is important, how it will be utilized at various levels and with various stakeholders, activities are planned, budgets are refined, etc. There are also systems that can be overlooked as they are often not seen as "core".

One such system is often placed under the label "Logistics". This might start with procurement but must include the overall responsibility to manage the dispersed vehicles passengers, and cargo. This ADRA "start up" process helps all the staff sees the totality of the program and how their duty and



responsibility contribute to the overall success. In multiyear programs ADRA often initiates a midterm evaluation that examines the strategies, systems and procedures that management has put in operation and makes recommendations to management on adjustments needed. In the last months of a program a final or impact evaluation is initiated to better document what has been learned, the results that the strategies, systems and procedures delivered.

On the financial side of a program the standards and procedures are tested for compliance utilizing various tools that the auditors have developed. These three tools take rather accurate “snapshots” for administration and management providing an “X-ray” of the underlying health of a project or program.

ADRA has found that project health at times does not translate into agency administrative health. A system of “Country Reviews” is being redesigned which looks at administrative systems such as governance, human resource management, risk and liability management, etc. providing feedback to a Country Director on compliance to ADRA Policy and Standards.

The final tool is training. Over the past decade ADRA has implemented a competency based staff development initiative. The ADRA Professional Leadership Institute (APLI) delivers this skill training at three regional locations impacting some 500+ mid to upper level management each year. Competency training covers a range of areas from Security and Risk Management, Monitoring and Evaluation, to Governance.

Staff capacity training and learning cannot be viewed as a luxury as it is so vital to short and long term success. With well designed systems highly trained staff will return new levels of effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.


ADRA INITIATIVES

This past year ADRA has undertaken several initiatives that will require the insights above to assure short term success and long term sustainability. ADRA has joined the Make Roads Safe Initiative and has actively promoted a range of messages and behaviors to increase staff safety while driving or riding in vehicles. Road deaths in the NGO community are unacceptably high accounting for roughly 50% of humanitarian deaths.

Another initiative is to work with Fleet Management and Kjaer Group A/S to conduct fleet audits in Africa. This too will contribute to safety but more important will generate the insights and knowledge to initiate more rigor to ADRA vehicle management. It is anticipated that implementation of new standards and procedures will have a significant fleet operating savings. One very small initiative is illustrative. Peter Delhove, the ADRA Madagascar Country Director, provided some training to the drivers. One of the topics was on the importance and value in proper tire inflation. The result is a 50% reduction in tire punctures and a 20% increase in the life of tires.

In May ADRA presented basic Road Safety and Fleet Management to some 75 ADRA leaders from across Africa. Over the following days a couple of leaders proudly showed me notes they had prepared to seek funding to initiate campaigns and activities in fleet management and road safety. Now to nurture these budding initiatives!

ADRA was incorporated in 1983 by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The principles and concepts that guide and motivated this formal creation can be seen in church activities with increasing clarity over the preceding 100 years. Working through empowering partnerships with people in poverty and distress to create just and positive change has always been a core value. ADRA implements a wide range of activities to relieve suffering and build awareness and support for human needs in over 120 countries.

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