

Action Support Centre Strategic Planning Process: Session 1 19-21 November 2007

1. Introduction

On the 19-21st of November, the Action Support Centre held the first of three strategic planning sessions to be hosted over an 18 month period. The first session's objectives are:

1. Developing a common understanding of Action Support, Past, Present and Future
2. Putting in place the instruments and mechanisms to build a solid organisational foundation
 - This includes this initial step of establishing the appropriate organisation design, and
 - subsequent steps focused on business process and people-related interventions

The purpose of staggering the strategic change process is to mitigate change fatigue, ensure the least disruption to the programme; as well as provides staff and partners with some space in which to acclimatize to potentially sharp shifts in organisational boundaries.

The second session will be hosted in July 2008 and will focus on enhancing performance, particularly in the content area through specifying detailed outcomes and impacts and the related strategies to achieve these.

The final session to be held in December 2008 will put in place a comprehensive strategy to achieve heightened outcomes and impacts over the proceeding three-year period focused on all the elements covered to that point, including, strategy/content/programme, structure, process and people, which will be monitored and revised annually.

2. Purpose of this report

The key result required from this first session was to review the key weaknesses and strengths in the organisation and, notwithstanding the primordial role of strategy/content/programme assumed uncontested, propose recommended structural adjustments to support the organisation's delivery on its mandate or strategic focus.

This initial session was intense and achieved a number of results:

1. Participants identified key strengths and weaknesses in the organisation;
2. Participants worked through critical leadership issues affecting relationships in the organisation;
3. Participants identified the preferred organisational design that would best suit their working context – strategic and operational.

This report will focus to a large extent on the third achievement, namely, the preferred organisational design for the working context, but will briefly reflect on the preceding two

3. Key strengths and weaknesses

Through an interactive process of introspection, iteration and critique, participants concluded the following:

- The organisation has achieved good results despite the financial and organisational challenges
- Programmes are limping in a survivalist mode of operation
- Conflict emerges when programmes are required to “finance” the core without clear service levels
- Programmes have lost their linkages because the centre cannot hold
- On the relationship side, there is a sense of lack of transparency in management decision-making, which undermines trust and breaks down communication lines

4. Critical leadership issues

After the assessment of strengths and weaknesses, participants in groups designed organisational models that they believed would enhance their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. Three models emerged:

- A fluid organisation that concentrated the programmes in the centre, with limited structure but with a service unit to address common and administrative roles;
- A structured organisation that also concentrated the programmes in the centre but with more structured relationships within and between the programmes and with a functional relationship with a service unit that addresses specific roles such as financial systems and reporting, fundraising services and branding services;
- A hierarchical model with management controlling both programme and administrative support roles in terms of defined managerial functions.

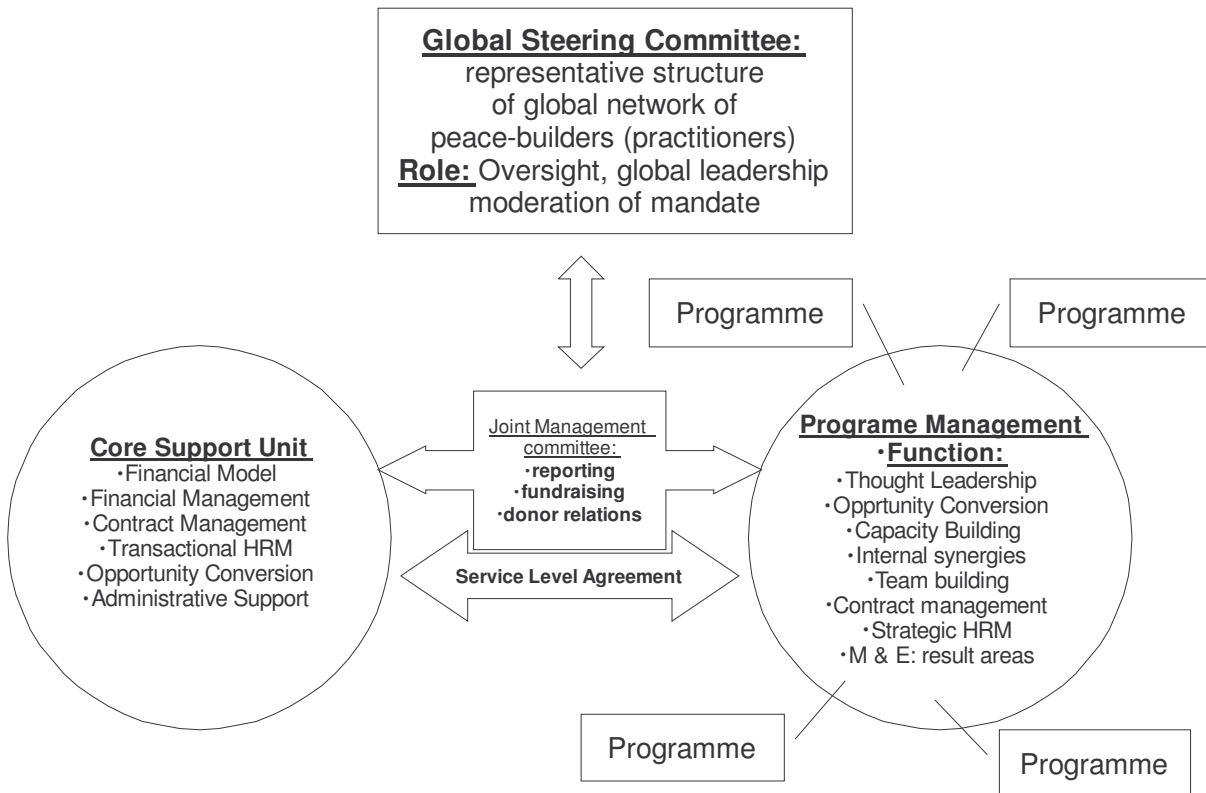
At the point at which participants were required to support their preferred model, one of the leaders chose to remain “objective” and not commit to any one model, preferring to present three models to the steering committee for their guidance. Most participants viewed this as neglecting leadership responsibility and the facilitators requested all undertake a role-playing exercise that explores the deeper issues emerging in the relationships.

While the process culminated in the parties agreeing to a tacit compromise wherein the leadership would engage with the programmes at their level and let go of scientific managerialism in favour of a more open management style; and the programmes would attempt to understand the complexities of leadership and management, especially governance, the hardened attitudes still prevailed throughout the remainder of the process.

Subsequent to the process, the facilitators have noted concerning patterns of behaviour and further encourage parties to seek ways to come together more openly.

5. Preferred organisational design

Through an interactive process of elimination, the parties concluded on circular organisational model wherein the programmes are the centre of the Organisation and moderated by a programme management function, supported by a service unit that addresses common support functions, specifically HR, Administration and Finance. These two distinct structures will be synthesized through a joint management committee, ultimately accountable to the Global Steering Committee.



6. The process of implementation

The implementation of a revised structure will follow a measured route focused on testing and experiential practices rather than enforcement. Therefore, should this preferred model be adopted in its proposed form, roles and staff within the organisation will initially test it in-situ for a period of six weeks isolating the problems and challenges as well as opportunities for refinement. Following this, and depending on the outcome, a further six week period may be allocated for refinement or the structure will be adopted as it may be.

Proceeding this six or twelve week testing period, staff and roles will be required to track the processes in their daily work and look for ways to synchronise, enhance, collaborate and ultimately collate (in process maps) the business processes in the organisation. This, together with standard policy guidelines, will inform the policy and procedures manual. This is expected to take four to twelve weeks depending on the prevailing organisational context at the time, based on the same testing principles as the structure.

Emanating from the inclusive structural redesign and organisation policy and process development undertaken the finalisation of the People dimension will follow. Naturally the previous two elements will shape each staff member and consultant's contracts but the finer detail needs to be put in place in with labour relations standards.

Although this is the general process anticipated, context and organisational events may determine a different course. Notwithstanding this, the participants agreed on some key dates in 2008 for roll-out, all things being equal:

- **Friday, 11 January:** Mini-workshop to consider feedback on preferred model from Global Steering Committee
- **Friday, 1 February:** Commencement of testing phase of revised organisational model
- **Friday, 21 March:** Review of testing phase and agreement to proceed with Policy and Procedure module or retesting
- **Friday, 28 March:** Commencement of Policy and Procedure exercises and/r second phase of structure testing
- **Friday, 16 May:** Review of Draft Policies and Procedures Manual and confirmation thereof; and/or second structure testing phase and in the case of the latter, commencement of PPM process
- **Friday, 27 June:** Review of PPM Process and/or commencement of People Dimension (role profiles, contractual elements)
- **End July:** Consolidation of all elements - structure, process and people - and second session of strategic planning process

7. Recommendation

That the Global Steering Committee review the process undertaken and notably the collaborative spirit in developing the proposal, and:

1. Consider and comment on the proposed structural design
2. Support the organisational development exercise outlined in 5 and 6 above