

An INGO perspective on the future of work - People in Aid 2011 Annual Conference

Barbara Frost

Introduction and background

I'm Barbara Frost and I have been CE at WaterAid since 2005. Prior to that I ran the international NGO Action on Disability and Development, having worked for seven years in Malawi and Mozambique for ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children.

As a passionate advocate for the importance of staff engagement, I am delighted to be among a gathering of people professionals – all working to address inequality and poverty in some of the poorest parts of the world.

WaterAid is very lucky to have an excellent HR Director, Rachel Westcott, and a Board who are committed to investment in people and didn't hold back even when the economy has looked shaky.

WaterAid is 30 this year and we owe our origins to the UK water industry who set us up after attending the first UN Decade on water as they were outraged about the numbers of people in this world without safe water to drink or a decent toilet.

Since that time through our investment in local organisations and advocacy 16 million people have gained access to safe water and our turnover has grown steadily. This year we anticipate over 10% growth on last year's income of £48m.

We have aspirations to do much more because 40% of the world's population don't have a toilet and nearly a billion are without safe water – this is taking a huge toll on lives and livelihoods – especially on women and girls.

Consequently we have an ambitious 6 year global strategy 2009 - 2015 to work in 30 countries providing 25 million more people with services and 100m more through our influencing work – this will require us to double our annual income by 2015.

People are fundamental

I am sure many of you have similar stretching targets and we know that to deliver our plans we need excellent leadership and high performing teams.

I heard the entrepreneur James Caan from the Dragons Den speak last week and he said, "it's not about the product, it's not about the idea, it's the drive and leadership of the people that is key to success". I think those of us in this room would agree.

A people strategy

Like many of you here we have a Global People strategy and we invest around 25% of our total expenditure in our 650 staff globally.

In reflecting on the challenges facing the INGO sector over the next 5-10 years and how to prepare for them I have grouped them under four headings:

1. Developing effective influential leadership
2. Selecting and developing the right staff
3. Being truly global organisations with suitable reward packages
4. Building the right organisational cultures and work environments

Number One - Challenge - and Opportunity - is to develop excellent leaders

I am sure many of us have identified lack of effective leadership as what is holding back development in the sectors in which we work – in the water and sanitation sector we have identified poor leadership as one of the fundamental barriers to progress.

We all know that where we have good leaders in our country programmes or in our functional departments, things get done. Leaders that can inspire those who have the power to make change at local, national and global levels are fundamental to NGO success - and in the same way where there are good leaders with drive and vision in the organisations we partner with, change happens.

I was in Uganda recently and the leadership drive of the district level water manager in Msindi, who had mobilised the district council officials and the NGOs to work together, had transformed communities.

Like many of you, WaterAid decided to invest in a leadership development programme and a leadership development manager and a few years back and we developed a programme to promote our values and the leadership behaviours which together we had identified as crucial to delivering our strategy. I am sure many of us here have been part of leadership development programmes and I was thinking about what it was that made this one a success.

Firstly, all our global leaders including myself were part of the programme and the groups were drawn from across the organisation so people got the opportunity to really bond with people from outside their own team.

Secondly, I think it was successful because it was a very personal programme of self discovery and understanding based on simple exercises such as learning to challenge and support each other, to get to I'm OK/You're OK and really understanding our personal impact on our colleagues.

There was no doubt it was transformational – never before have I heard such consistently positive feedback from staff of a development programme. Some were so changed they said they were worried their spouses or partners would no longer recognise them anymore!

Personally, I learned more about myself – the impact of my chosen style on others. I learnt I needed to be clearer on what I expected of my colleagues and also of the direction I wanted to take WaterAid in. It reminded me that as CE my role has to be solution focused, to inspire colleagues and to value everyone in the team equally with both passion and compassion.

It is really music to my ears these days to hear colleagues talking much more about what they are going to do to lead change and to overcome an obstacle. I'm delighted with the step change that's happened – gone are the days that leadership was seen as a dirty word linked to hierarchy and control.

Our leaders are really living out our values to be accountable, inspirational, inclusive, courageous and collaborative and always learning.

To prepare us for the future, having our global leadership teams taking shared responsibility for the delivery of our strategies, for living our values and demonstrating our leadership behaviours, is really important.

The second challenge is to ensure we are fit for the future is all about recruiting and developing the right people and managing them well.

We all know this, but it is such a huge challenge and will continue to be as we all work in an increasingly competitive world. I think it takes real courage, trust in our instincts, an eye for passion and potential to find the right people and then when we have got them to manage them well.

I have certainly learned how important it is for our future to recruit for attitude and potential as well as for skill - attitude is so hard to change while skills can always be built.

Tim Smit from the Eden project also talks about making sure people can work together as a team and like each other, given the amount of time we all spend in our work place together. He thinks that we are all wasting energy and money if we recruit people when the chemistry is wrong.

Now I would not like it said we do this in WaterAid but we all know that recruiting the right people is so important for our long term success.

I have learnt a lot about interviewing from our Chair who is brilliant at asking the killer question about doubts that might be in our minds but often we fail to raise until after the applicant has left when it's too late to check it out with the candidate.

With so much going on I think we are all tempted at times to just get on and fill a vacancy – this is where a strong HR team can be so helpful asking “are you sure” and to encourage us to think again if we have not got the right choice reminding us that a poor choice will be a bad investment for the future and is not fair on the applicant.

What's more, recruiting for potential and developing and training our staff is I think a very important contribution NGOs make to the future and to sustainable development.

Having selected the right staff managing performance well can also be a challenge and I suspect WaterAid is not alone in needing to do more on good performance management.

We have found that not all managers are good at having courageous conversations about performance and in being fair to staff by making sure they are aware of how they're doing.

I think as compassionate organisations we can let ourselves down by not giving timely and clear performance feedback.

We have adopted a global performance management system where all staff globally receive a rating either – under-performing, improving, successful and exceptional - linked to progression points on our grading and pay scale.

This has required us all to get much better at giving feedback and holding those courageous conversations to ensure we are all clear on our expectations, how we are doing and what could improve. Using the concept and the words “courageous conversations” has really helped us as it gives us a common language.

The third challenge for the future is developing ourselves as truly global organisations with suitable reward systems

NGOs now aspire to be truly global organisations working across borders and moving away from the charitable model of UK based organisations working in developing countries.

This is quite a challenge for us to think and act in a much more global manner – while at the same time being responsive to local contexts and complying with local laws - think global, act local.

Given that many of us joined the NGO world because we are driven by social justice and rights, parity in our reward systems is an important value and I think we have all struggled with how to get this right.

All of us want to know and feel that our organisation values us in the same way wherever they work and we expect fairness and transparency. Like many of you we have spent a lot of time thinking about and have developed global standards which are adapted to the local context.

We recruit for the right skills and offer a competitive reward package based on the local market rate for the role.

We have found that the right skills and experience needed to get the best outcomes and deliver water and sanitation in WASH are normally found in people who really understand the politics, culture and language of the country in which they are working.

Where necessary, to get the right person, we will offer a relocation package but we no longer have expat salary scales and our conditions are based on the country of operation.

This approach has its challenges as senior country staff may be attracted to expatriate packages on offer from others and there are fewer opportunities for global transfers which for some is disappointing. However looking forward we would hope that others follow this trend as it is about the best people to do development, breaks down barriers and moves away from the out dated expat culture.

Our last and fourth challenge relates to creating and maintaining a high performing environment.

This includes the culture of the organisation, the engagement of staff, the physical environment and how we work.

Like many NGOs, we have a passionate and compassionate fun loving culture – a family feel – which in fast-growing NGOs can be challenging to maintain.

This culture promotes staff engagement and is very important to us but it can lead to a clogged up email box – the recent announcement of the arrival of an early baby led to dozens of emails.

We were really pleased that 97% of our staff took part in our global employee survey and that engagement levels were good at 78% - however in some areas such as living our values we slipped slightly.

I think we all know that all our staff want to feel involved in shaping the organisation's plans and strategies and I am sure a shared challenge is balancing consultation to build buy-in with action.

Our internal communications colleagues have in fact been really helpful in building engagement and alignment with our mission through regular updates on progress.

On our physical environment I think we all want to provide a positive, accessible and comfortable working environment for our teams and the challenge is investing in our future - while spending our hard earned supporters' money well.

We were recently provided the opportunity to take and refit an extra floor in our UK office, which was great as we really needed more space. The big and brave decision we made was to invest in this refit for the future - rather than to give the new floor a lick of paint. I am pleased we did this as colleagues are delighted with the new space, which is light, comfortable, has good disability access and looks and feels more professional.

However, I think it is quite a challenge for us all to get this level of investment right for the future and to raise the standards across all our offices. I am very aware that some of our offices are unsuitable for wheelchair users, are not well lit and have small rooms with closed doors which is not conducive to good team work.

My last challenge in this category is work-life balance, which I think many of us are concerned about and which will erode our staff engagement if we don't address this better. It's not easy when colleagues are so passionate about their work, but this can turn to resentment and burnout which of course none of us want.

Someone said last week "The world has never been as fast as it is today and it will never again be as slow as it is today," which means this challenge is not going to go away as more and more information comes our way.

Conclusions

So, in conclusion, I think our really important challenges to prepare for the future are:

- to build and maintain effective influential leadership
- to find and develop the right staff
- to build a truly global organisation with competitive reward packages, and
- to create a high performing environment

For WaterAid, we want to hang onto the comment in our Investors in People report, which described an “intoxicating atmosphere of determination to make a difference”.

And of course we want to maintain a sense of fun, which has always been part of our culture.

Thank you.

A few pictures of our work:



