

Stewardship in Tough Times

By Alastair Bateman

We had wanted to be better stewards of our resources for a long time. We were already planning to allocate a greater proportion of our resources away from our headoffice and into our front-line work. But when the credit crunch occurred in late 2008 and we predicted a 10% fall in income we knew we had to act quickly. We launched a Stewardship Project to make sufficient cost savings to enable us to maintain our funding of front-line activity in the face of falling income. This was a difficult and painful process. We had to take hard decisions. We had to face and manage conflict. But as a result of taking early, considered, faith-ful action our organisation has become stronger and healthier as a result of unwanted cuts.

We knew we had to make savings across the whole organisation. We scrutinised every department. In some we undertook a more comprehensive strategic review. This enabled us to see whether particular departments were 'fit for purpose' and at the same time see how we could obtain significant cost reductions. One of the reviews focused on the Creative Communications Team (CCT).

CCT Strategic Review:

A project manager oversaw the five month process. We looked at different specific questions in three phases of the review:

Phase	Questions
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ What specific problems are we trying to solve?▪ What do the CCT team produce currently?▪ What savings target should we have?
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Should we have an in-house CCT capability?▪ What are the alternatives? E.g. external delivery
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ How should we restructure (if we don't want an in-house CCT)?▪ How can we improve in order to deliver the required savings?

The first two phases of the review focused largely on process and planning. We examined the financial merits (and costs) of having an in-house team compared with possible alternatives. The conclusion from Phase Two after extensive analysis of costs and risks was to retain our in-house capability, subject to specific recommendations for improvement in planning and process.

But planning for change and actually implementing that change are two very different things. It was clear to us that the changes suggested would bring tension between people and perhaps surface underlying conflicts. It was likely to deepen any existing mistrust. Because of this we decided that at the same time as implementing the proposed changes, we had to explicitly work on managing conflict to ensure that relational issues did not prove to be a stumbling block.

Conflict resolution - key to implementation

A lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities had already resulted in the breakdown of trust between some individuals which made the working environment challenging. Defensive and blaming behaviours were not uncommon.

We found a book called 'Relational Leadership' by Walter C. Wright to be a God-send. There was a helpful section on Conflict Resolution including a reflection on Philemon from the New Testament and this formed the basis of two workshops for the six CCT leaders towards the end of the review.

The attendees were asked to read Philemon and the accompanying article in advance of the workshop. The following 10-step structure was followed in two sessions of two hours each:

Session 1

- Step 1 Defining session expectations
- Step 2 Reflecting on Philemon
- Step 3 Discussing how diversity can lead to conflict
- Step 4 Addressing conflict positively - Caring Confrontation versus Criticism
- Step 5 Sharing honest observations of unhealthy conflict
- Step 6 Worship and reflection time

Session 2

- Step 7 Identifying CCT diversity by contrasting work principles we hold dear
- Step 8 Sharing positive examples of personal outcomes to conflict

Step 9, 'Agreeing next steps and accountability' is critical for sustaining changed behaviours. The team agreed common relational values that they wanted to focus on:

- Listening – to the other's perspective
- Understanding – trying to understand it
- Honesty – already a great strength of the team
- Perseverance – even when it isn't easy to develop character (James)
- Friendship – seeking to look beyond the specific task at hand

They also planned to put specific individual values they wanted to work on in their personal development plans – formalising them as part of the organisation's performance management process.

Initial Outcomes

It is too early to say whether this process has been a success. There are some good signs. The team leaders responded positively to the challenging feedback (step 5) and they were proactive with suggested next steps (step 9). One of the most promising is their desire to meet with clients to apologise for times when their critical behaviours have damaged relationships. Progress against all the review recommendations including relational improvements will be tracked in ongoing quarterly project board meetings.

My Learning

Adjusting to new economic circumstances is a fact of life for Christian organisations. We learnt that it can be approached in a Christian way that emphasises the importance of being good stewards of whatever resources God entrusts us with. It can be used as an opportunity to redirect limited resources on the areas where we are doing most to achieve the vision God has given us.

This process of economic adjustment should be done in a timely, considered, strategic and prayerful way. We started as soon as we predicted a potential fall in income. This gave us time to do a comprehensive review of the whole organisation. We did not just take the quick-fix, but often superficial, option of sacking a few administration staff.

Implementing change required us to manage inherent conflict. We realised that for the planned changes to become reality meant that some dysfunctional conflicts needed resolving. People needed to hear feedback, change behaviour; forgive and be forgiven.

This conflict resolution process was greatly assisted by learning from the example of Philemon. We integrated honest feedback and also prayer. We used our shared Christian faith as a strength in this difficult process, not as a constraint. Too often our faith makes us think we have to be 'nice' rather than truthful. We continue to pray for a positive transformation in all our relationships as we address conflict in a more loving way.