



Towards A Learning Organization – ERM Consulting

Context & Issues

ERM Belgium - Holland, is a subsidiary of a large US based Environment and Sustainability consultant. The organization we worked with counts +/- 60 Consultants and management committee consists out of 6 Partners. One of the issues of ERM was the difficulty within a consulting context to develop junior consultants and have them coached and mentored by their senior colleagues. Their original idea was train senior consultants in delegation and coaching skills.

Our Analysis of the issue

Environmental Consulting is a very specialized, highly technical and very fast evolving activity. ERM's customers will be confronted within the next years with issues of pollution, waste, scarce or very expensive raw materials, and changing societal and legal environmental expectations. This makes innovative expertise development a key success factor for the further development of ERM's consulting business.

Our preliminary analysis revealed a number of hindrances to the necessary expertise development within the organization and it became clear that it certainly was not a 'competency issue' that could be solved by training senior consultants in delegation and coaching skills

The intervention process

So the organization needed to understand what prevented them of being a 'Learning Organization', sharing knowledge and even more importantly creating the innovative solutions for the future. We decided to try to answer that question and find durable organization changes by involving all 60 staff. We did that in a number of steps :

- Focus groups to identify the hindering and facilitating forces for learning in the organization
- A workshop with management and project leaders to understand the issues brought in by the focus groups and start to brainstorm for solutions
- Several working groups (all staff involved) to define a strategy for expertise development
- A workshop with management to define a number of organizational levers that would trigger ongoing learning and expertise development

This process led to a number of 'organizational changes' such as :

- Restructuring of the organization in a matrix organization, where business is driven by a 'business development team' and expertise development is driven by several small teams of consultants rallied around a number of key expertise areas to be developed further. The contribution of those teams is no longer only based on their short term billability but also on expertise development objectives (networking, joint research with universities,

etc...)

- clarifying business strategy for all in order to focus on the important areas for expertise development
- a restructuring of the performance management process, including the billability systems for consultants
- Support for team leaders (Team Development Guide)
- Support for individual coaching (Individual Development Guide)

Outcomes

The new organizational mechanisms were only just put in place. The first early results are promising, in the sense that the expertise development teams are setting up a strategy for expertise development and the first actions are being put in place. The business development team is still looking for an effective strategy. Individual coaching has been launched throughout the organization (team leaders are coaching). The way project teams are organized and how the learning from those projects has to be captured is currently looked at. (we will update this brief as soon as more results become apparent)