



Case Study 16

HR/OD Intervention Focus: Human Resource Management

Capitalising on Human Resources for Effective Governance

In an organisational assessment conducted around three years ago by the Philippines Australia Human Resource and Organisational Development Facility (PAHRODF) on the Provincial Government of Aklan (PGA), it was determined that the latter was weakest in the area of human resources (HR). Australia Awards scholar Methuselah “Bing” Santamaria, who has been

in government service for eight years and currently serves as assistant department head of PGA's Provincial Human Resource Management Office (PHRMO), agreed with this finding.

Santamaria concedes that at that time, PHRMO hardly operated in any HR capacity, with many of their employees lacking in training and development to improve their competencies. Their operations were transactional in nature, and their roles were relegated to merely record-keeping. Through the Provincial Road Management Facility (PRMF), another Australian Government funded program, PHRMO was given the opportunity to benefit from PAHRODF's assistance. Considering the Facility a great blessing, she says that “PAHRODF came to help us reinvent ourselves.”

PAHRODF's recommendations following the organisational assessment were quickly accepted for implementation with the full support of top management. Three areas that needed attention were identified: the provision of HR training through a training and development division, the installation of an electronic human resource information system to update records, and the review of PGA's recruitment, selection and promotion policies. Santamaria says that addressing “the big three” meant “not just competency building, but also systems installation.”

Three interventions were then conducted, with participants from top management including the Governor, Department Heads, and representatives from the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) and PRMF. The first intervention covered learning and development, which then progressed to human resource development planning. The second one was meant to help PHRMO establish its electronic HR information system, and the last one provided scholarships to qualified individuals.

Santamaria admits that working with Learning Service Providers (LSP) during the interventions was something new to her because the government does not usually have the budget to hire consultants, but PAHRODF gave them access to excellent and patient LSPs. She shares that they "didn't just learn the how-to's but the complete thing – for when the intervention is over and the system is installed. Participants were also introduced to new concepts such as sustainability action plans and risk management plans, and Santamaria reckons that the interventions brought out the best in PGA's employees and among them, future potential leaders, as they were all given the opportunity to shine.

The Australia Awards Scholarships (AAS) was provided, with five slots allotted to human resources in order to address PGA's weakest area. Unfortunately, none of those who qualified for the scholarship came from HR, including Santamaria who was still not with PHRMO then. She and three others went on to take postgraduate studies related to HR.

Before leaving for Griffith University to take up her masters under the AAS, Santamaria initially wanted to establish the training and development program in her department. "But later on, I realised it is too limiting," she reveals. While in Australia, she shifted to Human Resource Management (HRM) as she realised that after her studies, she would then have to take on more than just training and development.

She admits that she wasn't ready to be assistant head of PHRMO when she was chosen for the role, but she relates that the interventions prepared her for the work ahead. "My learnings from the intervention have really helped me as a person and as a worker in the government. It has made me see clearly what we mean by strategic direction," she says with pride. While her time at the university has given her a broader perspective and the fundamentals of strategic

HRM, the intervention given by the LSP upon her return fleshed out in greater detail the steps she needed to take for her organisation. Bing explains, "In Australia, it's very academic...but with the intervention of the LSP, the steps and systems that we had to install became crystal clear."

PGA-wide HR strategy

Santamaria reveals that she had to revise her Re-Entry Action Plan (REAP), an integral part of the intervention meant to help her apply her learnings to address organisational gaps in PGA. She had to shift from installing a training and development system to developing the 2015-2017 human resource development (HRD) plan for the entire province which, in turn, came about because the Facility had already initiated an HRD plan for 12 of the road-related departments. "But when that was done, we realised that we cannot do only HRD planning for the 12, because if you talk about human resource, everything in human resource affects everything in the province," she reasons.

Thus, in line with the learning and development functions of their department, her REAP then focused on identifying the competency gaps of all of PGA's departments and strategising on the types of intervention needed to address them. Santamaria shares that the HRD planning intervention supported by PAHRODF and implemented last year has been helpful in harmonising the budget and their activities. "With the HRD plan, we calendar the training and target the participants," she says.

To minimise the usual practice of making departmental training budgets without any basis, she has also insisted that the basis for the allocated budget must also be clear and linked to the

systematisation of training programs. With this plan, she hopes to develop more targeted programs that will really zero in on enhancing competencies needed by the participants. Her REAP is nearing completion, and she continues to work on it with other AAS scholars. “We have already finished identifying the competency gaps of all the departments. We are grouping them according to sectors, but we have not yet packaged the whole thing,” she shares.

A bumpy ride

Although they currently enjoy all-out support from top management—including the governor and the legislators—plus the budget to run the programs, Santamaria mentions that getting to this point was not without difficulty. As leadership changes every three years, explaining the program and convincing new officials of its merits must be done repeatedly. “When PAHRODF started, we had a different governor. When I left for Australia for the scholarship, there was another governor—the one who started all these. He was very supportive. He was the one who put me in this department. When I came back, we had a different governor and a new set of legislators. We had to make them understand why you have to do this REAP, why you have to send people to training. Training is not very attractive to local executives [as] they see it as an extra expense,” she explains.

Likewise, she brings up the challenge of getting the department heads to get out of their comfort zones and embrace the change. “If you have department heads who have been in government for 30 years and all of a sudden, you introduce something like aligning objectives to provincial objectives, doing this, resorting to electronics, and so on, it’s something new and difficult,” she reasons.

Santamaria also laments the scarcity of qualified scholars. “They (scholars) have to be in positions of influence; they have to be administrative officers. But if you look at the structure of the government, the practice right now is to promote people according to age and tenure in office. Those who are qualified don’t want to go back to school. Those who are ready and hungry for learning and postgraduate opportunities are not yet qualified. So there is mismatch in qualifications and standards.” She finds it such a waste that as a result, PGA has had to let go of scholarship opportunities.

Significant developments

Notwithstanding these setbacks, Santamaria highlights how much PHRMO has transformed particularly in light of the new HRD plan, her ongoing REAP, books and manuals, and a trainer pool that handles training across departments. As she puts it, “When I started, we were just an office dealing with papers. It was really just the secretariat of the governor processing papers of appointments, etc. But now we have the training and development systems. It’s working but we are trying to refine everything.” Now, employees see the PHRMO as the department that looks after not only their benefits but also their competency needs.

What Santamaria considers most noteworthy among the developments in their organisation is the change in mindset. Their once myopic perspective has turned into awareness of their contribution to the provincial government. Whereas strategic thinking was not even in their vocabulary before, now everyone is thinking about strategy.

She adds that they are also more keen now to ensure that the province’s resources are maximised, that their spending is aligned with the province’s needs. As she puts it, “The best

thing that the intervention has left us is the realisation that everything we do in all departments must be aligned with the mission and vision of the province. Before, we really didn't even think that way. We just went to the office and most of us would just wait for 5 o'clock to leave."

Just like the road network that PRMF concerns itself with and which got the ball rolling for PHRMO, the path to good governance, it seems, will not only have an impact on PGA. With Australia's help and with all local government units doing their part, the entire country stands to benefit. "Good governance will help alleviate poverty. And one of the ways government employees can help do this is by delivering excellent service which will result in the development of the lives of the constituents," Santamaria muses.

Methuselah "Bing" Santamaria finished her Master of Human Resource Management from Griffith University in 2013. Her REAP focused on identifying the competency gaps of all of PGA's departments and strategising on the types of intervention needed to address them.