

CASE STUDY -- to illustrate the application of the Moving Forward Check-Up™

The context

Biologics and Genetic Therapies Directorate (BGTD) is in Canada's national Department of Health. Its counterpart in the United States is the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research (CBER) within the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). BGTD is the Canadian federal authority that regulates biological drugs (products derived from living sources) and radiopharmaceuticals for human use in Canada, whether manufactured in Canada or elsewhere.

The challenge

Nine years ago, BGTD had a significant chronic backlog of unprocessed submissions from industry seeking approval for proposed new therapies. Some of BGTD's counterparts in other countries knew that BGTD had backlog. Pressure to eliminate the backlog was coming from industry, medical practitioners, advocacy groups (e.g., Cancer Society) and politicians.

Conditions within BGTD were not great:

- Turf wars and poor team work
- No clear accountability
- No sense of priority
- Inconsistent decisions
- No systems to report on key performance indicators
- Several managers who were reluctant to change their ways

The organization had adopted a defeatist culture: "we will never get rid of the backlog and meet performance targets".

The response

Planning: Getting started

BGTD's Director General established a small Guiding Team of directors and key managers. Together, they decided that the BGTD's "way of being" had to change in order to move forward. It was decided to kick-start performance improvement with a culture change initiative. This began by conducting a 360 organization feedback survey that sought feedback from all 300 managers and staff in BGTD and about 200 persons outside BGTD (pharmaceutical industry, advocacy groups, physician associations and federal and provincial governments). The survey was also used to identify opinion leaders (positive and negative) in BGTD, who were defined as persons to whom others go to get opinions on what is happening in BGTD. The 360 organization feedback provided insights to how the organization viewed itself and how outsiders viewed it. A preliminary assessment of the survey findings was used as a basis for testing various hypotheses with directors and opinion leaders in 1-1 interviews. The survey and interviews were then used to prepare a Discussion Document that presented a synopsis of the findings and proposed actions, with supporting rationale, that would change attitudes and behaviours and lead to eliminating the backlog. Each action was referred to as a "Big Rock" that needed to be moved. To focus attention and keep things manageable, the number of Big Rocks was limited to seven.

The Discussion Document was distributed to everyone in BGTD, followed by inviting everyone to attend a discussion group set up at nine different times to accommodate staff schedules and maximize their participation. The format at each discussion group was to present a summary of the Discussion Document plus highlights of previous discussion groups followed by time for questions. Participants were then requested to develop what they thought would be the right Big Rocks – empowering them to agree, modify or replace the actions in the Discussion Document – suggesting that they limit the number of Big Rocks to seven.

The Guiding Team synthesized the outcome of the discussion groups, resulting in an action plan comprised of seven proposed action (Big Rocks). Participants at an all-staff meeting rated each of the Big Rocks using a wireless decision support system. The outcome was very strong support for four of the Big Rocks, moderate (50-50) support for two of them and very little support for one of the Big Rocks. The mood of participants was very positive based on comments made before, during and after the meeting, providing evidence that the action plan had good traction.

Implementation highlights: Making it happen

Implementation was led by BGTD's Director General (DG) and a Guiding Team. The overall objective was to eliminate the backlog and meet performance targets by changing BGTD's culture and improving its performance. Moving the Big Rocks required improving:

- Teamwork, within and across divisions in BGTD
- Follow-through on plans
- Project management
- The physical work environment

To move forward, it was important for the DG to fulfill expectations created at the all-staff meeting. A quick win was to resolve grave concerns about the physical workplace. This provided directors, managers and staff with tangible evidence of follow-through on plans. Training and coaching focused on teamwork, resolving differences of opinion and project management.

Throughout the implementation of the action plan, it was important to establish and sustain alignment and accountability:

- Directors and managers were involved in establishing clear objectives and priorities
- Everyone was required to state in their personal plan what they would do to help eliminate the backlog. Supervisors were expected to periodically review plans with their direct reports and make changes if necessary.

Also, it was important to be alert, listen and “nip challenges in the bud stage”. Challenges included:

- Reoccurrence of old problems, e.g., breakdowns in teamwork and resolving differences
- Resistance to using information available from BGTD's counterparts in other countries who had rejected or approved the same therapies
- Concerns about values, ethics and public safety, e.g., concerned that hasty reviews to meet performance targets could result in prematurely authorizing the marketing of therapies

Overall, the DG needed to commit and follow-through on being transparent and embracing distributed leadership. This required developing engagement starting in the planning stage, balancing being patient and listening with maintaining urgency to move forward and providing substantive responses when senior management's perspective differed from that of managers

and staff. Often, it was simply getting persons to listen to each other and develop understanding and common purpose.

The outcome

The backlog was eliminated in 24 months (12 months ahead of schedule) with very few additional resources. Since then, the organization has not had a backlog and has had two different lead executives, providing evidence that the changes made 8-9 years ago have stuck.

George Neufeld's role in the above example

During the planning / getting started phase, George led and facilitated the process and supplied the supporting tools. The approach was based on a customized version of his Moving Forward Check-Up™ methodology.

During the implementation phase, George provided consulting, training and coaching services to address acute challenges. Training and coaching services focused on team building and resolving differences of opinion.

There are many more cases. Here are the highlights of two more examples.

For a nuclear energy company, George had been involved in three (costly) reviews to improve alignment of its research program with corporate objectives and priorities – lots of recommendations but no change. Subsequently, George was engaged by the CEO to undertake a project to get agreement (sign-off) from research managers and key users on changes that would improve alignment and identify cuts in research programs that would result in savings of 25%. This was achieved in 10 weeks using a customized version of his Moving Forward Check-Up™ methodology. *(George was subsequently engaged to assist implementing the changes.)*

For a Canadian government department, George led an exercise to resolve a 10-year-old policy issue involving twelve provincial and territorial governments, an industry sector and an influential environment organization. The result was widespread agreement on an action that led to Ministers of federal, provincial and territorial governments signing an agreement within months. The action plan was the outcome of two two-day multi-stakeholder meetings using a customized version of George's Moving Forward Check-Up™ methodology. *(An official from a provincial government sent George an email saying "Thank you for your role in the delivery of a project that had become a stalled effort".)*