

CASE STUDY LEADING EMERGENT CHANGE

A FEW HARD RULES MADE AN IMPACT ON BUSINESS AND LIVES

Whilst this has happened quite a while ago, it still feels an exemplary account of how to create the conditions for change to happen successfully – the foundation for emergent change: In the early 2000s, a large multinational with a strong presence on the African continent was faced with a strong increase in prevalence of HIV Aids in particularly its Africa region. Originally, its stance was that dealing with this was people's individual choice and a country matter. However, when the potential business impact became significant and societal expectations shifted, it was clear that more was needed.

Originally, its stance was that dealing with this was people's individual choice and a country matter. However, when the potential business impact became significant and societal expectations shifted, it was clear that more was needed. The traditional approach, at the time, would have been to create a set of companywide guidelines, that prescribed in great detail to operating companies in the various countries what to do.

Choosing a different approach

However, in this unprecedented situation, I was lucky to work with a senior sponsor who was open to a different approach, putting into practice some of our first learning around emergent change.

We brought a few representatives from 'head quarters' together with representatives from key countries, Kenya and South Africa in particular as their situation was most pressing. Jointly we agreed that lengthy deliberations about detailed guidelines were not going to be the way forward, and would be sidelining the initiatives that had already been going on in the separate operating companies. At the same time, it was felt that some alignment was important. So they created four hard rules, that would enable freedom to act within a specific direction.

A few, hard rules to govern the change

I can still remember the four hard rules, because they were so simple, so beautiful and so impactful and real. They were:

- Educate – provide education that helps people understand which types of behavior risk you becoming HIV positive, and what you can do to prevent it;
- Do not discriminate – HIV positive staff are not discriminated against and included in the work process as much as possible;
- Treat – treat staff and their relatives if they find themselves HIV positive;
- Cooperate – don't do all this alone, but seek cooperation locally and internationally, with NGOs, local communities other companies and medicine providers.



Enabling others to take charge

During the period of creating the hard rules, the countries involved already started to work within these bounds, and the hard rules helped release the energy otherwise caught up in discussions about what was or was not allowed. After a short period of trial, the hard rules were signed off by the regional leaders. This gave authority a place and engaged the regional leaders on the importance of this critical subject – which more often than not, also impacted them personally in some way.

And so the operating companies in five pilot countries set out to work. They could do what was needed, using their energy to create solutions that fitted their circumstances, as long as it complied with the four hard rules, and they actually did something.

After about 6 months we organized a large learning conference. Again there was a hard rule here: to encourage learning to spread, when two or more delegates came together from one country, headquarters paid their accommodation and conference fees.

The conference was one of the most touching and inspiring displays of learning and progression I have ever seen. In a few rounds of open space work, we gave countries the opportunity to share the stories they felt most proud of, as well as situations they found most difficult.

Common themes were addressed together, new solutions were found and a final panel discussion offered to the organization's HR Director an enhanced set of the hard rules for application in other regions as well. To keep things real, a visit to an orphanage and HIV testing were included for all attendees.

Lessons from this entire process for us were many. When there is a ripe issue, a clear intention combined with a simple, memorable set of hard rules gives guidance and mobilizes energy for movement. Starting small enables swift spreading – because the pilot countries could do what they needed other countries joined swiftly. Tuning into the system, bringing together the wisdom and the struggles further fuels progress – the learning conference was crucial in giving the initiatives a voice, and in transferring skills across borders. Networks help create movement – the hard rules around conference attendance enabled the cementing of networks that continued to move the cause and made it possible for people from the smaller countries to bring their wisdom. And containment matters – hierarchy was important in endorsing co-created hard rules, articulating intention and direction, creating a sufficient umbrella of sponsorship that allowed self-organization to make measurable impact, and in stimulating conversation about the –initially small – visible signs of success. It was a privilege to be part of this wonderful work.

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