

The Challenges Facing Today's Leader

André Gladu

NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS APEX Symposium

Panel Discussion Ottawa, Canada May 27-28, 1997

**"Top management's view of leadership:
a never-ending paradox."**

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Introduction

I would like to share with you my "favorite case study." In other words, I will review the main changes we have experienced at HRDC, and more specifically in the Quebec Region, where I have been in charge since 1992.

First of all, I will quickly review the background of this change, and then explain the challenges that have come up and the action we have taken to deal with them.

Secondly, I could reflect with you, if you agree, on the lessons we have learned, to better prepare us for the challenge of tomorrow: a Public Service that is revitalized, responsible, open, and ready to face the challenges of the new millennium.

To conclude, I will briefly come back to the quotation about leadership as paradox.

One caveat before we begin: I am not claiming today to provide either guaranteed recipes or solutions. My only objective is to tell you about our experiences at HRDC Quebec; so much the better if they give you some food for thought for your own organization.

The Case of HRDC Quebec

Background

- HRDC was "born" in its current form on June 24, 1993, and the implementation of the new regional organization began immediately afterwards.
- The new Department brought together a number of components/sectors (employment, unemployment insurance, income security, social development, labour, literacy, and family allowances), all with different missions, traditions and cultures.
- A number of other major changes have occurred since that transitional year (1993): reform of social programs, the Martin budget (1995), budget cuts (5000 positions/20% of staff), the shift towards greater use of technology, the new service delivery network, the Employment Insurance Act (Bill C-12) and, finally, the recent agreement to transfer to the province responsibilities for the active employment measures funded by Bill C-12.

- This list is impressive in itself, but it made our lives difficult, mostly because the pace of these changes was without precedent. At HRDC Quebec, we have undergone more major changes from 1993 to 1997 than during the previous 30 years. (I can say that with confidence because I've been working at HRDC since 1967!)

Challenges

The main challenges associated with these changes could be summarized as follows:

- To create a new culture at HRDC, Quebec Region, which, without denying anyone's accomplishments, makes room for everyone and for all the different, valid ways of doing things - not favoring the "majority" (EIC) or systematically rejecting any aspect of the "smaller" components (eg social development, labor or Income Security Programs - ISPs).
- Other challenges that we had to take into account were the need to communicate constantly with employees and managers, reinforcing the main thrusts and direction of the change, and to find synergy between the components and take action to bring them together (ISPs in local offices, and management committees and multidisciplinary groups to rethink the organization, EIC and ISP investigations, etc). I cannot place too much emphasis on communicating with staff. It is a pet subject with me and I often say that when we think we have done all we can in communication, that's the time to do more. Among the means we used were: any number of staff meetings, ADM videos, Info Express, "Write to the ADM," and so on;
- Staying the course we had set ourselves, keeping staff morale high, and managing relations with our outside partners (Members of Parliament, media and organizations in the field);
- Finally and most importantly, maintaining a high level of client service to ensure that clients of our programs and services (claimants, target groups, the elderly, etc) did not end up paying the price for our "organizational saga." Quality is an important factor in bringing people together (EIC, Labour and ISP). Discussions on topics such as service quality should not just be lip service. Concrete action must be taken, such as operational monitoring by the ADM, and letters of recognition sent to managers and employees, but also letters of dissatisfaction, client and employee surveys, etc.

Action Taken

- First of all, in 1993-1994, HRDC Quebec managers were willing to bet that our employees could also be part of the solution, so we decided to promote empowerment for each staff member. For us, that meant wishing and allowing each employee to have the utmost latitude to make most decisions involved in his or her duties where it counted, in direct service to clients, and enabling the employee to do so. We have done a great deal of work to develop employees' versatility with our client service officers' duties. We have substantially reduced the number of middle managers, thus allowing our employees more freedom.
- This management direction has meant greater ongoing support to develop employees and managers. For example, from now until June 1997, some 200 middle and senior managers

will systematically receive tailor-made leadership, coaching and team development training, without mentioning other types of training developed for them.

- We also chose to act quickly to set up the new network of service points (from 80 CECs to 28 HRCCs), to carry out the staff reductions (approximately 1,500 positions over 2 years instead of 3) and the restructuring of our regional office (from 1,000 to 450 employees, and from 12 divisions to 6). This reduction could not have taken place without the existence of the incentives of which we are aware.
- The management team often discussed the effect that all these changes were having on the morale of the troops, and whether or not they were running out of steam. We tried to be attentive to employee needs by developing support strategies to provide them with appropriate services, especially during particularly turbulent periods (career guidance, training to achieve greater versatility, financial advice, personal assistance programs, etc), not to mention a support network set up by the union with our agreement.
- As I mentioned earlier, we invested a great deal in the managers who remained with the organization, but we also demanded a great deal of them. We asked that they give of themselves, that they develop themselves in line with the skills profile of a leader at HRDC, and that they agree to give and receive feedback (eg all-level feedback exercise for all of the some 40 senior managers in 1996-1997).
- As managers, we chose to favor the consultation/participation method to move forward with difficult decisions (eg working groups on regional restructuring, participation of union representatives and sectoral groups in the transfer negotiation process with Quebec).
- To implement this transfer of responsibilities, we are once again going to have to count on consultation within the management team, but also on each manager's commitment to be completely honest with each employee. For me, this is essential.
- On a few occasions, I have referred to the union. I do not believe that we could have got through these changes without the co-operation of the union. For the past ten years, on the initiative of my predecessor, we have agreed to the unions playing a more active role on committees and in processes (Malcolm Balbridge assessment), and in some management meetings (Bromont), etc.

Lessons For Tomorrow

If I try to draw some lessons from my experience at the helm of HRDC Quebec, the points that come immediately to mind are the following:

- The leadership required of any manager involves certain contradictions! I will explain this by referring briefly to the study I mentioned at the beginning. In order to successfully carry out a reorganization or staff reduction, or to achieve organizational efficiency, an appropriately firm management style is required. But how can service quality be maintained when service points are being closed, activities centralized and positions cut? How can a feeling of belonging be encouraged when dozens of employees are leaving, etc?

- Simultaneously, the same leader must be able to remain sensitive in managing issues related to employees' needs, clients' expectations, and tensions within the management team. My experience has taught me that being available and promoting consultation, open dialogue and solidarity within the management team are essential prerequisites in order to achieve this. I would add that problems, and still less rumors, should never be allowed to go unaddressed.
- That being said, I also know by experience that reconciling these two ways of doing things is not always easy. The underlying synergies are very different. Also, to project an image as both an "effective leader" and a "leader capable of really listening," the manager must be capable of versatility and able to adapt to circumstances.
- I am convinced that leaders must base themselves on a multi-faceted approach, and the literature on management of large organizations bringing together different groups confirms my belief. They must be able to comfortably manage on the basis of well-defined organizational objectives (structural approach), while taking into account people's needs (humanist approach). In addition, however, they must be able to detect tensions, power struggles and turf issues (political approach), not to mention promoting certain key values within the organization and proposing evocative symbols to help the team develop its own culture (symbolic approach).

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that the Public Service will be a frank, open and revitalized one to the extent that each manager focuses on what I call basic values, as follows:

1. being demanding as managers;
2. recognizing jobs well done as well as noting those done poorly;
3. finding themes that have a uniting effect (service quality being one);
4. having all stakeholders participate in the life of the organization, which includes both employees and union representatives;
5. communicating, communicating, always communicating;

The "never-ending paradox" in managing the organization of tomorrow is first and foremost this difficult apprenticeship for each of us as managers in learning to live with a certain friction or ongoing tension between our different management styles.

- * 1. From a report on a European study on leadership published in "Public Administration & Development" (vol. 16 - 1996), as quoted in the most recent issue of the CCMD publication "Executive Learning."

About The Author:

André Gladu is Assistant Deputy Minister, Human Resources Development Canada, Quebec Region and winner of the APEX Award for Career Contribution, 1997.