

Building an HR Network Strengthens Capacity of East & Central Africa Region

CARE Rwanda planned a series of staff workshops to introduce the CARE competency framework for staff development. Rwanda's HR manager needed more facilitators for the project and sent out a request for help via the e-mail list of the East and Central Africa (ECA) regional HR Network.

Burundi's HR manager responded that she would come, since she wanted to hold similar workshops in her country and could use the experience. Allison Burden, the Regional Program Coordinator and Regional Management Unit (RMU) point person for the HR Network, also pitched in to help.

Later, HR staff in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) circulated an e-mail among the network stating that they, too, needed support to facilitate competency workshops throughout the DRC. Allison and the HR managers from Rwanda and Burundi all heeded the call for assistance.

"The learning from the Rwanda and Burundi experiences came together in the Congo," says Burden. "We were able to share what we knew and bring consistency across the training without starting from scratch."

The ECA region offers many such examples of the benefits of building and maintaining a strong regional HR Network. On a day-to-day practical level, the Network gives HR managers a ready resource at their fingertips. Need to create a job evaluation form? Before you start, send out a message via e-mail asking if anyone else has recently developed one.

"Circulating requests on our e-mail list is like fishing," Allison says. "If you can find someone who has been through an experience and communicate with them, you can learn from them. A really important aim of the regional HR Network is to reduce workload and improve effectiveness. If someone has already done something, why reinvent the wheel?"

And in the longer term, the Network helps keep the work of all 10 HR managers closely linked to the ECA's regional plans and strategies.

Building Upon a Regional Strategy

The ECA regional HR Network was initiated in 2002 to build the capacity of senior HR staff, develop and implement regional policies for staff development, and provide a forum for peer learning and the sharing of ideas and resources.

The subsequent creation of a regional program strategy in 2003 – to address the issues of discrimination, inequality and poor governance, in line with changes in CARE's global mission – brought staff capacity issues to the forefront, reinforced the potential contribution of a regional HR Network and helped the membership gel around a common objective, Allison says.

"Staff development became even more of a priority as our mission was changing," she explains. "If we're going to achieve these changes, that means we would have to promote changes in staff recruitment, development and attitudes and behaviors."

The Regional Leadership Team (RLT) asked the HR Network to identify the competencies that staff need to advance the region's strategy, and then to develop and implement methods to help build those skills. This mandate gave the HR Network a firm platform to build upon. However, it still took a great deal of effort, and continuous feedback from members and CO leadership, for the Network to grow into the viable and sustainable entity that it is today.

Overcoming Obstacles to Growth

Maintaining momentum between face-to-face meetings and balancing workloads were two challenges that the Network members encountered early on. During discussions at the Network's 2004 meeting, members determined that they needed Country Directors (CDs) to become more aware of the mission of the Network, and to provide more time and encouragement for the Network's learning and sharing activities, beyond attendance at an annual meeting.

As a result of these discussions, the RMU, the leadership team and the Learning & Organizational Development (L&OD) team all agreed to a set of clearer and more active roles in support of the HR Network. For example, all of the CDs agreed to stay more engaged in Network activities, to hold members accountable for participation in the Network, and to include Network action steps into members' IOPs. Three CDs, for Ethiopia, Burundi and Tanzania, volunteered to play lead sponsorship roles. They now participate in the planning of Network meetings and encourage support among other CDs.

"The CDs must not overstep the bounds of their supporting roles," says Marcy Vigoda, CD for CARE Ethiopia. "We don't want CD participation to be seen as micromanagement, or a reflection of distrust in the members' ability to manage themselves, but rather as a way of better supporting and valuing the Network."

At the 2005 meeting, the members once again discussed what was working and what wasn't working in the Network. They decided to lessen the duties of the Network leader, and to make communication among members more free flowing and spontaneous.

"One thing we realized was that our expectations for the lead were too high," says Yidnekachew Tessema, Administration Director for CARE Ethiopia, and the newly elected leader of the HR Network. "We expected the lead to conduct communication between members each and every time. But the lead also has many other responsibilities in a Country Office. So we decided, why don't we, as individual members, take the initiative? For example, if we have some idea or new topic to discuss, why don't we just copy everyone on the e-mail and have our say?"

"One of the strengths of our e-mail link is the fact that Network members can use it however they want to," says Allison. "Some of the discussions may not be with the whole Network, just two or three members. It's sort of like a book club. It's loosely run and kind of cool. And it's only as good as its individual members."

A Summary of Lessons Learned

For other regions seeking to develop or strengthen a regional HR Network or for groups of any kind seeking to develop a virtual network or community, the ECA HR Network members offer the following suggestions, or "lessons learned" from their own experience.

KEEP IT SIMPLE – While members of the ECA HR Network can tap into the network's e-mail list when they have a question or suggestion, no one is required to file regular communications. The e-mails provide a comfortable way to freely chat about issues and share information, without pressure or controls. There are guidelines – incoming HR managers are encouraged to introduce themselves to the network via e-mail – but no rules.

MEET WITH A PURPOSE – While the Network was in its formative stages, the members met annually. Now that the Network is more established, they meet about every 12-18 months. Each meeting is organized around a specific purpose, to ensure it is productive. Network members are encouraged to take the active lead on preparing, sharing and delivering during these sessions, to reinforce their own leadership roles and experiences.

DEVELOP BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL OBJECTIVES – In addition to a long-range objective – to use the competency model to improve the capacity of CARE staff – the Network members also set specific group goals. For example, they decided to explore ways to increase diversity in management. In one country, that may mean trying

new methods to develop women managers, while another country may need to focus on ethnic diversity. For each stated group goal, the HR managers brainstorm together to come up with practical approaches to achieve it, then provide each other with feedback on how these approaches have worked in their countries. Members are also encouraged to ask for support, and to share learning and experiences on an informal basis, via e-mail. The aim of these informal communications is to increase efficiencies and reduce workloads, by helping members avoid reinventing the wheel each time they face a new challenge.

ELECT LEADERS WITH CLEARLY DEFINED LEADERSHIP ROLES – A Network leader provides an entry point to the Network and helps keep the strategy on track. A leader can also help keep the Network engaged despite membership turnover. The ECA HR Network recently narrowed the role of its leader to three key tasks: bring together the HR Network; provide direction to key players within the Network and those who support it; and build up momentum and commitment among members by proactively following-up.

Another leadership role that has significantly contributed to the ECA Network's success is the RMU point person for the Network. From the beginning, the ECARMU placed a high priority on HR issues and the Network as a mechanism to address them. They demonstrated this commitment by assigning an RMU staff person to play a coordination and sponsorship role in support of the Network.

"One primary reason this network is strong is because Allison provides the persistent RMU leadership for this to work," says Joy Shiferaw, CARE's former Gender Equity and Diversity (GED) Advisor. "She is very good about keeping the momentum going, and she uses what she learns and applies it to her regional context. The GED work has moved forward through this Network because of her constant push."

In the ECA, it is clearly critical to have this kind of Network coordination, support and leadership role spelled out as part of someone's job in the RMU. The same holds true for all of the network participants – unless their Network activities are recognized as part of their jobs, their participation cannot be sustained.

RESPECT AND NURTURE THE DIVERSITY OF MEMBERS – The ECA HR Network is diverse, encompassing 10 Country Offices with varying levels of sophistication of the HR function. The Network membership includes multiple languages and cultures and varying years of CARE and/or HR experience. From the beginning, the ECA HR Network has worked to ensure that it was both respecting these differences and leveraging the potential benefits of this diversity. The Network prioritizes enabling members to actively participate in their own languages. Members strive to obtain resources in both English and French – translating materials themselves when necessary – to ensure workshops can be bi-lingual. When a member communicates via e-mail in one language, another member will often step in and translate the critical points so that all can understand.

In the early days of the Network, the members created a regional staff development strategy and priorities and assumed that all ECA COs would be able to implement these priorities consistently across the region. They learned from this experience, however, that different countries had different levels of readiness and capacity to undertake various HR initiatives. So instead they focused on supporting and encouraging those countries that were ready to take the lead and used the Network as a mechanism to ensure that members could learn from each others experiences.

LINK NETWORK GOALS TO REGIONAL STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS – When the countries in the ECA formulated their regional strategy – to address the issues of discrimination, inequality and poor governance – the regional leadership team asked the HR Network to identify the competencies that staff need to effectively advance the strategy, and then to develop and implement methods to build those skills. Though the Network had already existed for a few years, this mandate from the regional leadership team, and the now obvious links between the work of the HR Network and broader regional strategies and plans, gave the Network a greater sense of legitimacy and contribution among the members and others in the region.

"A regional HR Network cannot work in isolation from the leadership team and the regional strategy steering committee. You need a coherent strategy binding them all together," says Allison.

FORGE FORMAL BONDS WITH REGIONAL LEADERSHIP – Three Country Directors and representatives from the Regional Leadership Team (RLT) are now members of the HR Network. Likewise, a representative from the HR Network is also now a member of the Regional Strategy Steering Committee (RSSC). CDs who attend the regional HR Network meetings are formally requested to provide feedback on the meetings and to promote the work of the HR Network with the RLT. The involvement of regional leadership helps ensure that the Network's mission stays interlinked with regional objectives, and also gives CDs an understanding of the importance of the Network's mission. For example, as a result of this sponsorship, all CDs have agreed to incorporate the Network activities into members' individual operating plans, to ensure the members are allotted enough time to participate in these activities.

HR managers also gain more channels for communication with regional leadership. "HR Network members, because they have met me, feel free to contact me on questions and issues," says Kassie McIlvaine, Country Director for CARE Burundi and a member of the HR Network.

FORGE BONDS WITH GLOBAL HR – A strong two-way relationship exists between the ECA HR Network and the Global HR Division. The Network both taps the resources of various HR Units and leads the regional/local implementation of global initiatives promoted by these central units.

From the beginning, the L&OD Unit played a critical supporting role, providing both financial and workshop design/facilitation assistance for the formative meetings of the Network. Today, members of L&OD and the Human Resources Management Regional Coordinator for ECA actively participate in Network meetings and online discussions. These meetings and discussions provide a mechanism to more effectively share global HR tools and resources as well as to bring the region's HR best practices, learning and issues back to Atlanta to inform global HR strategies. For example, during 2005 L&OD collaborated with members of the ECA HR Network and representatives from the Southern and Western Africa (SWA) region on the development of the new Competency-based People Management Program (CPMP), a training curriculum for enhancing people management skills. In June, 10 members of the ECA HR Network teamed up with 10 representatives from SWA to pilot the curriculum and participate in a Training of Trainers workshop, to enable them to implement the curriculum in their respective regions and countries.

"Because ECA already had an active Network, it was much easier to share information and to solicit input and feedback from them throughout the design process," says Jennene Tierney, L&OD Unit Senior Advisor.

Also, because the global HR Division supports all CARE regions, it can help link the Network with CO's beyond ECA. For example, when CARE Ethiopia wanted to update its HR information management system, Yidnekachew turned to HR in Atlanta for advice. HR in Atlanta referred him to CARE Nepal, which had already developed such an HR system and was willing to help implement it in Ethiopia.

FORGE BONDS WITH COs BEYOND THE REGION – The ECA HR network has invited HR managers from outside the ECA to participate in some of its workshops and discussions. HR Managers from CARE Mozambique and Egypt accepted the offer to attend a competency workshop in 2003. "When we were working on our staff development strategy last year, we got good advice from CARE Mozambique," says Yidnekachew. "Even though they are not part of our region, they have given us good support."

The HR Managers from other regions have been able to bring the learning and experiences from the ECA competency workshop back to their own regions and they remain informal members on the ECA Network's e-mail list.

Expanding Their Influence

The East and Central Africa experience shows how a strong regional HR Network can help country offices tap tools and support as well as to provide influence and leadership on HR management and development initiatives not only from within the region, but globally as well.

Yidnekachew is especially proud of the ECA HR Network's contribution to the Competency-Based People Management Program (CPMP), which is now available to CARE COs worldwide. "We were very excited to be a part of the development process for the seven modules in the CPMP," he says.

After gaining initial input from the ECA Network members, L&OD Advisors Rachael Cogen and Jennene Tierney created drafts of the modules and sent them to the Network members for additional input and examples.



ECA and SWA regional teams at the CPMP Training of Trainers

"Our members contributed a lot of ideas for each and every module," Yidnekachew says. "This is a big achievement. Now many, many staff – not just within our HR Network, but staff in Country Offices all over – can benefit from our input."

As the newly elected leader of the ECA HR Network, Yidnekachew looks forward to helping the group continue to expand its influence through more sharing of knowledge among members, regional leadership, HR in Atlanta and COs around the globe.

"The HR Network has been a great opportunity for me to get valuable ideas, new initiatives and new thinking," he says. "A single individual will not have as many big ideas to handle all the activities in the Country Offices. I think each and every one of the Country Offices in our region has benefited from the ideas flowing through the Network."

Nick Southern, Country Director of CARE Tanzania, agrees. "I think much of the success of the Network has been in the HR colleagues appreciating that they are not alone in facing the many very demanding and challenging, and the sometimes seemingly intractable, problems of attracting and retaining the people that make CARE."

"The Network is about building upon our strengths rather than having things dictated from outside," adds Kassie McIlvaine, Country Director of CARE Burundi. "It is about determining our own agendas and directions. That is very empowering."

"As a member of the HR Network, the RMU team, the regional leadership team and the regional steering committee, I feel the connections more than anyone else," says Allison Burden. "We do have a shared vision, we do know where we are going, and the Network is helping us use different approaches to reach this place."

Conclusion

Over this past year, reinforced by his involvement with the ECA Network, the HR Manager in CARE Mozambique, along with some of his peers, has been actively advocating for the re-establishment of an HR Network in the SWA region. This initiative is now part of SWARMU's FY06 Annual Operating Plan (AOP) and the HR Network is seen as one of the critical new thematic leadership teams formed to advance regional priorities. Likewise, in 2005-2006 the Asia region (ARMU) prioritized the formation of an HR Network. The Asia HR Network had its first meeting in September 2005 and drew on the ECA experiences in designing the session. The next Asia HR Network meeting is scheduled for May 2006.

"Imagine the possibilities," says Jennene Tierney, who has been involved in discussions and planning for HR Networks in three regions. "We could have active HR Networks across all CARE regions, working together in support of CARE's regional and global people strategies and contributing to our vision of being a global force to end poverty."

The creation and strengthening of regional HR Networks, connected to a global network, provides countless possibilities for enhancing CARE's effectiveness, Jennene believes.

Mario Lima, the Director of CARE's L&OD Unit, cites three key benefits that could be achieved through the deliberate cultivation of globally-linked, regional HR Networks:

- Stronger CO participation in, and influence on, the development of CARE's global policies;
- Obtaining a holistic view of the HR areas where we are progressing and innovating as well as those areas where we could do better;
- Developing and implementing harmonized HR processes, systems and standards for improved efficiency across all of the countries we work in.

A lot can be learned and leveraged from the ECA experiences. The lessons captured here, about what it takes to make a geographically dispersed network succeed, can be relevant and applicable to other networks or communities on virtually any topic.

For more information on the ECA HR Network experience, please contact either:

Yidnekachew Tessema, ECA HR Network Lead: yidnekachewt@careet.org
Allison Burden, ECARMU HR Network point person: allisonb@ci.or.ke