

Diversity Has Nothing To Do With Us!

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CARE El Salvador (CES) – Overview of our Work

CARE began operations in El Salvador in 1955 by signing a basic agreement with the Government of El Salvador. Civil war in 1988 suspended operations, and in January 1993 as a result of peace agreements, CARE resumed a water and sanitation project. Today, CES has an office in the capital city of San Salvador and three more offices – one in the western side of the country and two in the east side. A total of 200 employees work today for CES in activities related to:

- Water and Sanitation
- Environmental Protection
- Housing, Risk Management, Mitigation and Emergency Response
- Education
- Capacity Building and
- Advocacy



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Background

I was recently assigned to be a Country Director in El Salvador. It struck me that the following comment would be frequently made when talking with colleagues about diversity: "... diversity is something born out of the United States and has nothing to do with our country where we all look alike..." At first sight, this might appear not only obvious but true for El Salvador where people are largely composed of the same ethnic group. Having participated in CARE USA's Gender Equity and Diversity Task force, it was clear to me that diversity was more than just appearance or visible characteristics that differentiate people. On the other hand, the more subtle differences in the Country Office were not very obvious to me and I struggled initially to express where diversity would be relevant within CARE El Salvador's unique context.

In order to effectively build on prior efforts to advance diversity, and to best acquaint myself to the local context, I followed the advice of a former CARE CD, and carried out interviews with every employee. I had three objectives in mind:

- To get to know each staff at a personal level
- To learn and understand CES's major strength from the employees' point of view.
- To know what were the areas I should focus on to make CES a better place to work and to gather ideas about how to enhance CES organizational effectiveness and understanding of diversity

Interview Process Results

The interview process provided me with a wide range of opinions not only on CES' strengths but also on the areas I needed to focus on. There was an overwhelming eagerness amongst staff to share their perspectives. Over 50% who participated emphasized that the two most important issues I needed to work on were related to communication and information sharing and the hierarchical distance between management and teams. It was evident to me that these issues were directly related to diversity, because they pointed to our ability to fully maximize on our staff potential. My interviews reinforced the findings of an extensive diversity analysis that was undertaken a year back. It was evident that staff felt strongly that the organizational culture does not fully facilitate effective

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teamwork. Staff felt that more mechanisms were necessary to ensure effective integration and collaboration amongst units and projects. To enhance learning, staff also identified a great need for more internal communication mechanisms to discuss successes and failures. When asked what causes these perceptions, over 50% of those interviewed stated that a huge gap exists between management and field staff. This gap in interaction was reflected in the way decisions were made, how resources were allocated and how information flowed. Over 82 people mentioned that it was necessary for managers to visit the field and communicate project related issues with the project staff more frequently. In addition, a large number of staff also felt that more work could be done to ensure more equal opportunities for staff at different levels of the organization. It was clear that gender, profession, and status in the organization played a huge role in impacting opportunities and access to resources. Overall, staff emphasized that these issues needed immediate action and could no longer be ignored.

A communication was sent out to all staff summarizing the findings, and several decisions were made to address them. Among many of the actions taken, one of the first steps was the implementation of a new inclusive AOP planning process.

Initiating the Change Process --

I would briefly like to describe this new process as it was the first important step in initiating a change process and in addressing the issues identified. In the past, management perceived the AOP process as their responsibility. Some managers involved their staff, while others did not consider broad participation an issue at all. Therefore, to change this critical decision-making process an open invitation was sent to all staff inviting them to participate in the AOP process – including management.

An important step was to define a clear selection criteria, as well as communicate a commitment to take diversity into account. Those who were interested were asked to submit an application that would indicate their position, project, their participation objective, and any special condition (i.e in need of transportation, or mothers with small children etc.). The CD and ACD would then review all the submissions and select participant numbers by ensuring that each regional office will have representation proportional to the total number of staff in their respective locations, and would ensure that a diverse team would be represented according to position, gender, region, and profession. An overwhelming number of staff expressed interest, and among those selected 40% were women.

The five days of this exercise proved to be a challenge as it was much more difficult to come to a consensus

when the participants engaged in the process represented different backgrounds, interests and points of view. One of the participants at one point exclaimed, “..we have been discussing this for hours and hours and unable to reach a consensus, we better vote and accept that we cannot reach consensus..” It took till the end of the fifth day to build consensus, but despite the length of time it took, staff felt that they were heard and gained ownership for their AOP and excitement for the creative ideas that were generated through this exercise.

We recognized once the ideas were developed that a real challenge would be in implementation. Staff also recognized that the implementation process would be a real opportunity to create partnerships across the various sectors in the organization, and build organization-wide accountability. A new way of implementing the AOP was developed. A team of five members representing staff from various professions, backgrounds, projects and level in the organization would be assigned to each AOP objective, and would function as an oversight team in implementation. A selection criteria was developed for team membership and participants made their recommendations and openly debated with each other if concerns were expressed about an individual. Those who were recommended to be in the teams were identified as strategic thinkers and who demonstrated the potential to be change agents. An open dialogue and debate over participation allowed for staff to understand the rationale for selection and to avoid perceptions of favoritism or inequity in the decision-making process.

In addition, a member of the diversity task force was assigned to each AOP objective team, to ensure that diversity was integrated into implementation plans.

Getting the Ball Rolling

Days later, these decisions were shared with all CES staff. Roles and responsibilities for all segments of CES staff were included in the new AOP format. In addition, it was clearly stated that the teams identified to oversee each objective would be responsible to promote on-going discussions, develop tools and materials, but the overall responsibility for advancing the articulated goals would be staff at all levels.

There were many who expressed concern over this new team-based approach. In particular, staff expressed concern around how teams with people from different positions and projects could possibly work together. To address this challenge, the first task of the AOP teams was to understand their differences and find ways of making these differences produce synergy not paralysis. A series of tests were carried out to discover the different personality types, learning and time management styles within each team.

It took several weeks for the teams to learn how to work together and to broaden understanding and define each objective. Additional time was allocated to identify external consulting expertise to guide this effort; define mechanisms to integrate the whole CO staff in the effort; and select additional support teams in each office to promote each objective and its activities.

At the present moment, I can see the process in retrospect and believe it was far from perfect . However, what we all learned through this exercise is that even when we all look alike, diversity has a lot to do with us and the way we carry out CARE's business. Diversity is a way of not only improving the quality of our products, but also a way of tapping into as many people as possible, with different backgrounds and experiences.

The Rearview Mirror

What could we have done differently? As simple as this process may appear, there were staff who benefited from prior decision-making approaches, and who heavily resisted this new approach. Some expressed that this process felt like something that was theirs was taken away from them. Some found it completely inappropriate to incorporate staff in lower levels in a strategic decision-making process— one commented "...it is unbelievable how a driver can take a manager's responsibility."

It was clear to me that we could have benefited from developing a learning agenda that would demonstrate the difference in staff morale and effectiveness before, during, and after the change was implemented. A clear set of change indicators would have helped in illustrating the impact of this effort for those who are resistant and doubtful.

It was also clear to me, that although significant efforts had been made in the past to broaden staff understanding about Gender Equity and Diversity even prior to this exercise, it is extremely difficult to internalize concepts into daily work and reality. We experience resistance because diversity does affect each one of us directly by changing power relations through shifting the status quo and those benefiting from it. We also tend to make diversity more complex than it is, at times the benefits of diversity are quite simple, it may just mean that we need more voices to be involved in decision making processes and to explore new ideas. More room and time is needed to fully internalize diversity within how we operate. Sometimes it takes a simple exercise to create the room for learning.

As of today, the AOP driving teams are perceived as the leaders of the change process. The concept of team work is no longer perceived as a threat by management, nor a place to complain about management by some staff. These teams are simply an illustration of our diversity and how such diversity can help us in becoming a more creative, relevant and inclusive organization.

Conclusion

I frequently ask myself, is all the pain and stress we have been going through, worth it? has anything changed?

A response to this question shortly came during a recent discussion about the upcoming LRSP process. While I shared the first draft of a new process that would be utilized for the LRSP discussion, a manager exclaimed "we need to ensure that participation in this process encompasses all levels of the organization since what we are defining is our future and the future of this organization is our collective concern."

I waited for different perspectives to be expressed, when a colleague confirmed "... but I thought this is not for discussion, we have agreed that all critical discussions need the participation of different perspectives...haven't we?"

I wish I could have recorded this dramatic change in opinion, especially in comparison to the resistance I first received only a few months ago.

There are plenty of lessons learned from this process and CES expects to perform a formal evaluation at the end of the FY. These are only personal notes that do not reflect the collective perception of CES staff but it definitely reflects my discussions with staff at different levels of the organization.

I also would like to thank Joy who did a terrific job in helping me out with this document. Thanks Joy!