

The Art and Craft of the Standing Team

A report from the meeting of CARE's Standing Team of quality and accountability advisors in Geneva Feb 23-27, 2009

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Overview

This report has two goals. For the CARE International Secretariat and its Standing Team of Quality & Accountability advisors, this report documents some of the key issues that arose during the initial days of first meeting for the Standing Team (ST) and the CARE Regional Emergency Advisors (REC). In the spirit of transparency and shared learning, this report has also been written for advisors to the Emergency Capacity Building Project within the other IWG agencies. The first section documents the meeting process, the second identifies the issues that arose during the first two days of discussion, and the third highlights some main messages about facilitation and the nascent art & craft of the Standing Team (ST).

The process

A self-assessment questionnaire (annex 1) was sent out to meeting participants about one week prior to the event. The questionnaire encouraged reflection on: the attitudes and skills of a facilitator; and their competence in the five main technical methods of the standing team (after action reviews, evaluations, training workshops, reflective processes and audits, and accountability systems). The event itself consisted of five days, with the agenda (annex 2) offering a progression of topics as follows.

First, the context for the meeting was set by presentations of the contemporary humanitarian response environment, humanitarian reform, and elements of the organisational strategy.

Second, plausible deployment scenarios for the ST were created.

Third, a sense-making conversation about the role and requirements of the ST resulted in five issues requiring further discussion.

Fourth, participants divided into groups with each responsible for managing a problem solving discussion about one of the aforementioned issues. At the end of each discussion, the facilitator was given constructive feedback on their technical skills by the group.

Fifth, an overview of CARE's performance against quality and accountability commitments was presented, drawing on results from the SCHR peer review.

Sixth, participants divided into groups to explore each of the five technical methods so as to: (a) agree the expected procedure, and (b) share experience and generate knowledge. At the end of each of these technical sessions, the facilitator was given constructive feedback on their performance.

Finally, the place of the ST inside the organisation was explored and next steps agreed.

It is important to highlight that an environment of peer feedback and learning was created. This 'critical friendship' encourages self-awareness, and demonstrates the required level of group safety and accountability for full participation and knowledge generation to occur.

The role and requirements of the Standing Team

When the ST is deployed, the individuals are required to achieve a robust understanding of the situation quickly. Not only does this understanding apply to the crisis context, but it applies to the culture and people in the 'client organisation' on the ground. Simultaneously, the ST individuals need to build trust quickly with their clients, establish effective working relationships, and engage productively with the relevant power structure. These are ***sophisticated interpersonal skills***. Paradoxically, while the ST is deployed with urgency, successful behaviour in this area seems to be about listening and observing – and managing the urge to produce results quickly. Preparation is important, as is demonstrating that the ST is not a threat but an ally. Engaging with the Country Director (CD) is important, and must respect their competing demands.

A second area of interpersonal competence is in ***negotiating expectations*** with the client organisation / Country Office (CO). It may be that the CO wants more from the ST than the ST can deliver. It may equally be that the CO is not clear about what it wants from the ST. In this case, the ST will need to help facilitate clarity about goals first, and then negotiate expectations. Once the ST and the CO are clear on their respective expectations, mutual accountabilities will need to be negotiated. This is a significant amount of negotiation and a degree of ambiguity is to be expected. This ambiguity will stem from the workload of a Country Office during a crisis. The CO is overworked and usually doesn't have the space to think through carefully what it wants from the ST. Moreover, the nature of crises is such that goals often evolve. The paradox should be clear. Everyone would prefer to nail down a clear and unambiguous agreement between the ST and the client CO prior to deployment, but due to the realities of emergency work this often proves to be impossible.

A third critical area for Standing Team members is in engaging with ***group dynamics and organisational politics***. At one level, ST members are perceived to be technical experts in quality and accountability systems. Staff of a client CO can defer to this perceived expertise. Yet, the goal is for the CO to drive and own the work of the ST. The challenge for the ST is about stimulating engagement in a potentially passive audience. Each ST member will have to adopt an engaging way of working that exploits their strengths and personal style. At another level, ST members will be required to perceive and manage hidden conflict and power issues in the CO that influence quality and accountability. Conflict is a natural part of life, and can reasonably be expected to accompany the changes associated with new organisational systems. To some degree, ST members will need to be able to perceive and respond to this.

A fourth area of interpersonal skill in the standing team is in ***creating environments of safety***. Safety is critical for learning. Explained simply, when people feel there is a safe space to express their thoughts and feelings, productive knowledge generating conversations can occur. An area of concern for ST members is around the variety of CO working cultures they might encounter. To what degree are ST members obliged to take action when they experience a CO working culture that contravenes the organisational accountability standards and ethical principles?

Finally, as can be construed from the discussion above, the practice of ST members when deployed can be viewed as a managing set of competing interests. Here are three examples. ST members are part of the same organisation as the client CO, but they are also independent. ST members are technical experts, and they are neutral facilitators. ST members are catalytic change agents, trying to achieve local ownership and they are accountable for making change happen. ***Balancing these tensions*** will be an inherent part of the ST craft. While ST members will have to clarify the ambiguities in their role as often as possible, they will also have to make contextually appropriate decisions about managing these tensions. A fourth tension may be about scope of ambition, organisational complexity and pragmatism. A realistic outcome from a ST deployment may not, on the surface, appear to be of sufficient complexity. ST members may need the confidence and courage to defend their decisions upon return to HQ, and they may need robust organisational support to enable that courage.

The art of facilitation and the craft of the Standing Team

CARE is refining its technical methodologies for Standing Team deployments, and there are plenty of toolkits to provide the basic framework and techniques for facilitation. Missing is some guidance on how to manage the relational aspects of facilitation. Standing Team members are organisational change agents. Change is an exciting, threatening and challenging process for organisations and employees. At the core, I believe the Standing Team needs to be highly adept at interpersonal relationships.

Here are some concluding thoughts therefore, on the craft of the Standing Team:

- Be very clear on your objectives
- Tolerate the anxiety that accompanies an ambiguous conversation
- Summarise frequently
- Be curious and ask questions
- Trust your instincts
- Play to your strengths

END