

RELEASE IN PART
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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, August 23, 2012 6:20 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: FSO Management/Training Issues

Thought this was interesting - asked Linda for follow-up

From: Huebner, David
Sent: Thursday, August 23, 2012 12:20 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: FSO Management/Training Issues

Cheryl,

No action on this is requested or necessary. I just thought it might be useful for you to see, when/if time permits, two emails that I recently sent to the DG re a set of issues that I understand have been of interest to S.

- D

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<http://newzealand.usembassy.gov>

<http://samoa.usembassy.gov>



From: Huebner, David
Sent: Tuesday, August 14, 2012 6:57 PM
To: Whiteside, Ruth A; Thomas-Greenfield, Linda(MS)
Subject: FSO Management/Training Issues

Dear Ruth & Linda,

I am having a recurring problem here at Post that I would like to raise with you in case there are resources available to help address it. If my situation is not unique, the problem may point to institutional or structural issues that could perhaps be addressed in the portfolios managed by your teams.

In a nutshell, a surprisingly high number of the officers assigned to senior management positions in Wellington and Apia are unprepared to actually manage their sections or teams. I am not talking about people of intermediate skill being assigned to positions requiring them to stretch a bit. I am talking about people who exhibit no understanding of management processes, dynamics, or requirements being put into positions of authority, and who thus affirmatively disrupt the operation of the Missions and harm American interests. I do not make that last statement lightly.

When I arrived at Post in late 2009, there were 10 DoS officers in my two Missions whom I would consider to be in upper-mid or senior management positions. Four of them were performing at a professional, indeed impressive level. Another one was performing at minimum competency, requiring substantial and detailed ongoing direction. Five – a full 50% of them – were performing well below acceptable competency and in ways that created serious morale, retention, and performance issues for the junior officers and locally engaged staff under them. After six months of remedial mentoring and engagement, I prepared to curtail the three most destructive officers, [REDACTED] Because it became clear that the Department would not provide replacements, [REDACTED]

B6

[REDACTED] Simply vacating that chair led to significant improvement in morale and performance [REDACTED]

I have taken an active role in recruiting and then helping select new officers as rotations occur. I thought that such active involvement would correct the problem, which I had attributed to New Zealand and Samoa simply attracting a disproportionate share of “lifestyle” or “problem” officers because the Posts have for the past two decades been low-activity, low-ambition outposts. I am finding, however, that many – thus far, a third – of the incoming officers share the management skills deficit despite having strong 360’s, excellent c.v.’s, and prior positions that would have involved leading teams.

Specifically, the core deficits that I am encountering are in the following areas:

1. Supervision – inability to manage direct reports to keep them productive, on deadline, efficient, and producing quality work. This is a basic skill and a startling deficit to find so pervasive.
2. Time management – inability to manage their own time to advance priorities, keep on deadline, produce quality work, and consistently function as manager / leader rather than as individual project lead.
3. Prioritization – inability to organize work in a way that assures high-value / high-impact work is accomplished, and that triages lower-impact / lower-value work.
4. Quality control – a surprising inability to monitor and insure quality public product in terms of content, nuance, format, accuracy, and even grammar.
5. Portfolios – instinctive disregard of individual portfolios within the team, thus leading to herd stampedes from project to project, with insufficient continuity or attention to priority portfolios.
6. Mentoring / training – inability and indeed profound disinterest in devoting time to improving the skills of direct reports.
7. Human resources – surprising clumsiness in addressing morale and performance issues, in many cases simply avoiding issues.
8. Reviews – resistance to clearly articulating deficits and strengths, coupled with a belief that “faint praise” is the most appropriate way to flag serious performance problems. This one is toxic in that it seems to create a culture of entitlement around positive reviews, reinforces an unreliable “hallway” 360’s culture, and allows problem cases to coast for extended periods of time.

9. Mission orientation – inability to plan, align, and prioritize work to advance clearly articulated Mission objectives. This is perhaps the most surprising to me.
10. Context – a counterproductive, casual sense of fungibility that devalues prior history and context, creates a culture of superficiality, and leads – internally and externally – to transactional rather than relationship behavior.
11. Judgment – failure to consistently analyze before acting or speaking; inability to see potential ripple effects and ramifications; failure to evaluate multiple potential options / tactics.
12. Ambition – an instinctively passive, internal, and/or process focus, rather than an active, external, and/or results-oriented focus. This is the most serious issue, as it quickly infects the entire team and prevents meaningful progress on the other 11 issues raised above.

The above skills and attitudes can be taught if focused on specifically and intensively and then reinforced through consistent mentoring and evaluation. Progress can't be made if such skills are assumed, presumed, brushed over lightly or generally, or treated as less important than sexier, more "substantive" topics. Unfortunately, there is not the bandwidth at small Posts such as Wellington, Auckland, and Apia to do intensive remedial management training for a significant percentage of incoming mid-level and senior officers. As a general matter, I don't think that officers promoted to FSO 1 or 2 should still be exhibiting these basic deficits or be assigned as principal officers or to lead sections.

I would hope that my observations are not unduly discounted because I am a political appointee. My initial attempts to reorient the management culture at Post were met with various degrees of passive and active resistance, and a couple of prior attempts to raise the issues in DC were met with instinctive defense of DoS culture and excellence. I am in fact an enthusiastic booster of the Department, but that does not blind me to deficits that need attention.

In terms of my own background, I spent much of the prior two decades leading litigation teams and managing large international law practices, which are talent-based, highly skilled, diverse, diffuse, mission-oriented, "flat" organizations not dissimilar to DoS in terms of structural theory. I have high but not unreasonable standards. I have a laser focus on mentoring and skills building. I have had wonderful experience with the minority of excellent officers at my Posts, as well as with the competent middle. I have been particularly impressed with the resilience, ambition, and focus of my junior officers and many of the local staff.

I am, however, deeply concerned with the serious – and inexplicable – skills deficits that we continue to encounter at the upper-mid and senior levels. I am raising the issue again now because certain of my "new" officers share the dysfunctions of the legacy officers when I arrived, and I fear that the significant advances made at Missions New Zealand and Samoa – and consequently in our bilateral relations with those two nations – may and likely will evaporate under a less-hands-on or more culturally-casual COM. I am not inclined to generalize over the Foreign Service as a whole, of course, and I remain willing to believe that the problem is confined to Posts such as New Zealand and Samoa.

In terms of my two Posts, my question is whether there might be a management trainer who could be sent here for a week to do intensive, remedial training. That would be more cost effective than sending multiple officers back to Washington for training or having to face again the issue of potential curtailment.

In terms of the general issue, I would be happy to speak with someone further about specifically what I have been observing and experiencing. It may be that the curriculum or trainers in certain existing management skills modules are not fully calibrated to needs and realities in the field, particularly at Posts where there are not large volumes of officers or readily available resource work-arounds.

Apologies for the lengthy discourse. I thought it useful to present the matter fully and lay a foundation rather than simply make ask for a trainer.

Best regards,

D.

From: Huebner, David
Sent: Thursday, August 16, 2012 10:35 AM
To: Thomas-Greenfield, Linda(MS); Whiteside, Ruth A
Cc: Bernicat, Marcia S
Subject: RE: FSO Management/Training Issues

Linda,

Thank you for the quick response. Yes, I am a very active manager myself, and I engage in ongoing coaching of my team as part of our professional development process. I have had significant success with junior officers. I have found, though, that the more senior an officer is, the more likely that he or she will rationalize existing performance or otherwise discount the issues raised.

The concerns I raised fall into three distinct categories, each of which requires different approaches, many of which are beyond the ability of a Mission or Bureau to address:

SKILLS.

Some of what I raised is purely a matter of consistent, effective skills building. This is the easiest piece to address, but it is still not as easy as it may sound. The trainers themselves need to have been effective, successful, creative, self-reflective managers. The training needs to be hands-on and of a meaningful duration.

My own experience with the Ambassador training was a bit like having someone spend 30 minutes explaining ice dancing, as though that would be sufficient to equip me to strap up and pirouette on ice when I later arrived at the packed arena. Skills issues were skipped over quickly and lightly as though they were too obvious to belabor, like brushing one's teeth. That's not the case. Generally, most management and leadership courses I've seen don't take the challenge or the impediments seriously enough to be effective. I don't know if FSI courses suffer from that presumption, but I know that the Ambassador training did when I went through it. (The most effective element of the Ambassador training was the two full days spent on hands-on, fully interactive, role-play-based media training in very small groups. I consider that to be an excellent template for management and leadership training as well.)

CULTURE.

The most serious of my concerns are attitude characteristics rather than skills deficits, and those can't be addressed as readily through training. Very few of my officers instinctively think in

terms of accomplishing external objectives, producing results, prioritizing resources and activity by magnitude of anticipated impact, or evaluating effort based on outcomes. Instead, there appears to be a cultural focus on process rather than outcome, observation rather than action, and routine rather than innovation. My initial and ongoing impression of many of those who arrive at my Posts is that they have been socialized to be passive, incurious, and career-focused rather than mission-focused.

The culture of fungibility seems to lead to a norm of superficiality that significantly reduces our effectiveness. Again, those sent to New Zealand and Samoa might be anomalous. A small example: we are less than two weeks again from an S visit to the Cook Islands for the Pacific Island Forum; no officers believed it relevant to research US-Cook Islands historical links. I am now doing so. Also, this year is the 70th anniversary of formal US-NZ bilateral relations, and next year is the 175th anniversary of the commissioning of the first American consul in New Zealand. I discovered both dates through my own research, and the mission value of those anniversaries was not immediately obvious to key senior officers. I'm not sure how we spot-train for curiosity and creativity.

STRUCTURE.

Finally, I believe that part of the challenge is that certain structures reinforce counterproductive cultural characteristics. There are quite a few examples of what I mean by this. I will note only two that particularly surprised me.

First, when I arrived I saw evidence that senior officers were not taking the review process seriously, and that some writing highly positive reviews simply to avoid conflict over obvious performance deficits. I asked to see the final reviews drafted by my senior officers so that I could confirm that they were being comprehensive, candid, and productive in their evaluations. I was told that DoS regulations prohibit a COM from looking at even finalized reviews (unless he himself is actually the rater or reviewer), supposedly to prevent corruption and breaches of "privacy." There is no rational basis for that practice, and it degrades the value of the review process. It insulates counterproductive behaviors.

Second, it is clear to me that many of those who run the bid/assignment system believe that officers are fungible and that local circumstances at Post are of tertiary relevance at best. I have injected myself into the process, but it remains clear that the small groups of decision-makers often view such COM involvement as an unwelcome intrusion. I was told as much when my Consul General position was up for assignment last year. In that case I was told that the names of the people on the committee were "confidential" and could not be shared with me, and that COM involvement risked "corruption." None of that makes any sense. It institutionalizes an insider monopoly – and potentially a log rolling environment – detached from the very real differentiators and realities at particular Posts.

B6

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Again, thank you for the quick response. We will continue our internal professional development activities. We cannot, though, effectively address cultural or structural issues locally. We also face bandwidth and operational challenges in trying to retrain senior and mid-level officers in such a small Post. (As I said, we are having great success training the junior officers.)

I don't think that it would be productive to mobilize EAP. The issues are not specific to EAP, and I believe that there is little that EAP can do apart from generalized DoS efforts. I have found EAP to be very receptive to my management orientation and assignment intrusions. I have had nothing but excellent experiences with EAP, and the issue is not at EAP.

- D