Abstract - Chapter 2

Essence of a High Performance (Matrix) model

International development agencies have a hard job. They tackle long running, difficult and often life-threatening issues in complicated and diverse contexts. The internal organizational capacities of these agencies need to be up to the task. In this chapter we attempt to build on the suggestions that first emerged in chapters 1 and 3 of 'Building a Better international NGO'. Our thesis was (and still is) that a simple line structure, based primarily on geography and with a command and control management philosophy, is unlikely to meet the demands of a high performance agency in the 21st century. Instead, we believe that agencies need to embrace a more appropriate, high performance, matrix model.

Since the first edition of our book 'Building a Better International NGO' was published, we have had numerous follow up questions from senior agency leaders as well as curious Board members, typically phrased as "What would this new high performance matrix structure look like in practice?"; "How would multiple reporting lines really work?"; "How can we ensure that the benefits of moving to such a model outweigh the risks?". This chapter tries to respond to these questions.

What are the essential differences this kind of model should make? The benefits are stronger and more impactful programs, driven by stronger standardisation of approaches and through more effective sharing and learning. We expect to see much better decision-making both in prioritising the use of scarce investment resources and particularly in the allocation of scarce technical staff to the most productive opportunities. We expect better career development opportunities for all staff, allowing their careers to develop in multiple ways. As a consequence, the attractiveness of the agency as a place to work for the most talented staff (existing and potential new recruits) will be considerably enhanced. This kind of organizational model should result in a much stronger feeling of 'glue' and camaraderie as horizontal goals and responsibilities complements geographical accountability.

There are many variants in terms of how this is implemented. Making this kind of model work will require a transparent, professional and joined-up planning and accountability framework, with clear goals, targets and review processes. It will also demand a more interdependent and collaborative culture with leadership behaviours that may look very different. However, this kind of organization, properly implemented, should feel different and be able to contribute far more.