

True leadership through greater awareness

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Since 2015, Directors General of Customs and their executive teams have been able to participate in a ‘Top Executive Retreat,’ as a means of further strengthening their capacity in implementing change and in achieving organizational results. This article explains what a retreat is all about and the benefits that can be derived from attending such an event.

AT THE END of a WCO Top Executive Retreat (TER), the Director General of a Customs administration and his/her executive team leave with many new and fresh ideas on how to proceed with their main strategic challenges. They feel energized and full of confidence because, as a team, they have become stronger. Not only do they have clear objectives and expectations, their cooperation will also, from now on, be based on the three most important pillars on which every solid team should be built: trust, openness, and the value of disagreements.

In addition, the team have learned to ‘stand’ in their personal leadership, not a leadership based on power and position, but a personal leadership grounded in ‘self.’ Most importantly, they have become more aware of who they are, more aware of how to first manage themselves before leading and managing others, more aware of how to really understand others, and more aware of how to positively influence and have a real impact on others.

The above paragraphs describe in a few words what you can expect from participating in a TER, the more recent ‘product’ of the WCO Leadership and Management Development (LMD) Programme. The event is held over 3.5 days, and activities are divided between mornings, afternoons and evenings. Although each retreat is tailor-made based on the inputs received from members of the executive team, all share identical features and steps which are detailed below.

The mornings

Morning sessions are dedicated to personal development, leadership attitude, and behaviour and management skills. It is essential for strong leadership to have a strong vision. Not a purely rational and clever vision that covers all the needs of a modern Customs administration, but a vision that demonstrates personal passion. Robert K. Greenleaf, the founder of the Center for Servant Leadership said, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”





“The retreat only lasted three days, taking into consideration the fact that it is very difficult to remove senior people from their desks for too long; however, the work that was done in this short time was invaluable. The team was exposed to a number of critical issues that needed attention. Not only did we learn the value of establishing a climate of openness and honesty, which allowed for feedback from all the participants, it also enabled us to see the blind spots and take action. Such retreats are useful in that they are meant to change habits that have been formed over time. It is therefore one’s wish that they could be held more frequently.”

Dumisani E. Masilela,
Commissioner General, Swaziland Revenue Authority

“I was particularly impressed with the unusual way in which this retreat took place. The night sessions called ‘around the fireside’ were real approaches to discovering the personality of others. I understood that the objective of the retreat was, above all, to ‘break the ice’ between colleagues, in order to create a team that communicates and therefore, a performing team. It was a success because, through the often very moving personal stories that colleagues shared about their lives, our team gained in confidence, sincerity and probably efficiency.”

Michéline Iboudo,
Deputy Director General, Burkina Faso Customs

Next to vision, awareness is the key word in leadership. It all starts with knowing oneself and being aware that your qualities, beliefs, convictions, values and vision, influence the way you perceive situations, people, challenges or opportunities. The next step is to be mindful of your own thoughts, emotions - like fear, anger or joy -, as well as words and deeds at all times, in order to better manage yourself. The last step is to really understand others, to really listen to others, and to find out why and how they think and act as they do. This is a difficult, but necessary attribute for leaders as well as managers to acquire.

With these ingredients – strong vision, self-awareness and the capacity to manage oneself and understand others – it is possible to influence others and have a positive impact on them. During the morning sessions, the relation between these four ingredients and the outward roles and responsibilities of leaders and managers is constantly explored. Motivating, delegating, delivering and ensuring feedback, as well as coaching and communicating, are the topics put forward.

The afternoons

The afternoon sessions focus on the strategy and the modernization plan and priorities of the Customs administration. The objective is to agree on a way forward and how to deal with the challenges related to management and communications that might have been identified. While it is important to understand which actions have to concretely be done, the added value of the meeting lies somewhere else.

Firstly, the TER addresses the role and responsibility of different levels of managers in order to clarify the role of executive managers:

- operational managers have to learn to manage people instead of being ‘the best expert’ that does all the work himself/herself;
- senior managers have to develop the skill of managing strategically by focusing on processes, the future,

priorities and bringing balance to the organization;

- executive managers are challenged to lead and inspire the entire administration, and to reach out beyond the organization by building relationships with other relevant parties like the trade community, other Customs administrations, and the political and governmental systems.

Secondly, emphasis is put on ‘how’ to lead and inspire the entire administration. The success and outcomes of modernization plans and related implementation efforts is certainly not only dependant on the brilliance and content of the plan itself. The way top managers involve their staff and communicate with them, their ability to delegate, to inspire trust, to share their belief and passion, and to focus on the wellbeing of the staff, are often of greater importance.

Theories are presented and discussed, but the facilitators animating a TER concentrate mostly on asking probing questions and giving feedback. The aim is to enable the participants to experience what it really means to be an executive manager. Although participants might feel as if they are in a ‘constant confrontation’ state, understanding how to lead while ensuring a balance between ‘focus on content’ and ‘focus on relations’ comes as a relief to them.

The evenings

The team building activities take place during the evening sessions. These sessions are rather surprising and go far beyond the traditional approaches to team building. In a relaxed atmosphere, the executive team experiences what it is to be open and what it means to be personal, even vulnerable.

However, the ultimate objective is not only to build a strong executive team, but to create a high performing Customs administration. Such an administration must be a learning organization; an organization where giving and receiving feedback is not

an awkward moment, but is a driver for enhancement; an organization that doesn’t employ human resources, but human beings.

Unfortunately, too many Customs administrations still rely on hierarchical, authority-driven leadership and management styles that focus on traditional practices related to planning, organizing, directing and controlling. But, having excellent management skills is not enough to deal with objectives in terms of revenue collection, compliance, trade volumes, trade facilitation, security and integrity. An exemplary executive team is needed that aims to build leadership throughout the administration, in order to lay the foundation for a swifter organization and to modernize Customs processes.

The evening sessions aim to make the executive team aware that coping with all these challenges requires the involvement, or better commitment and enthusiasm, of all members of the administration. Participants are stimulated to use these insights and their personal experience after ending the retreat. It is now up to them to further spread this new spirit throughout the rest of the organization.

The LMD Programme

Up to now, six retreats have been delivered so far with success as the contributions from participants published alongside this article show.

Besides the TER, another important element of the LMD Programme is the LMD workshop for senior managers. The 10-day workshop is based on the same principles as the TER, but approaches leadership and management issues slightly differently, giving participants more time to understand, discuss and digest its content.

The WCO would recommend the combining of a TER and an LMD workshop to get the most desired outcome: executives and senior managers ‘speaking the same language’ in leading and managing important changes in the organization.

This is especially important right now, as administrations have to step up their efforts in implementing the provisions of the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement. Such an endeavour requires not only technical expertise, but most of all for Customs officers to demonstrate the right leadership and management skills whatever their managerial positions.

LMD facilitators feel positive, proud and pleased when, at the end of a TER, they watch a team walk out to start working

on their own and on their organization's transformation. Feedback shows that participation in a TER, as well as in an LMD workshop, provides an important impetus for modernization.

I hope that this article will have caught the interest of Customs leaders and managers, whom I look forward to meeting during a future TER or LMD workshop.

More information

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