

# ARL™ News

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## DIALOGUE AT THE UNITED NATIONS

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**Last month, LIM worked with the Regional Bureau of Africa of the United Nations Development Program. Beena S. Vilas, a LIM Learning Coach from that program, shares her experience with this organization.**

A little over a year ago, at the UN Millennium Summit, world leaders pledged to cut world poverty in half by 2015. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has now charged itself with helping to make this happen. Its organizational focus, from delivering a wide range of projects for development (by using aid effectively), has very fundamentally shifted, and is now on providing developing countries with knowledge-based consulting services and building national and regional global coalitions for change.

In the grip of this transformation, the Regional Bureau of Africa (RBA), UNDP's arm in that country, for the past year has sought to understand how it can function better internally, to actualize the vision and become the change it has committed to.

The Bureau decided at the end of 2001, to examine how they could work together more effectively, and to assess the impact on the Bureau of the UNDP's change and reform process. To this end, the entire organization of 42 individuals met over a three-day retreat with the express purpose of evolving a strategy for 2002 that would propel it forward and help it strengthen the synergies between field offices and headquarters.

This was a retreat with a difference.

As a Learning Coach with LIM, I was one of the six coaches who were charged with facilitating the retreat for the RBA team. LIM has a unique approach, using the process of Action Reflection Learning (ARL) that

engages groups of people to work on their work goals, along with such a sharp focus on team learning processes that real time changes in behavior are a natural consequence of the process. The objectives of the meeting centered on: identifying the key challenges facing the Bureau, and how to address them; establishing the organizational characteristics that will aid in addressing the challenges; the areas that must be strengthened in order to accomplish RBA objectives; and importantly, an action plan, complete with dates and assigned responsibilities, for execution of the proposed solutions.

Preparation before the retreat involved each individual responding to a questionnaire around priority areas and intra-office communication. This information formed the basis of the Learning Coaches' intervention. We presented, to the group, a summary of their responses, but in a way that brought about the first of a few tremors in the landscape of RBA functioning. The six learning coaches talked to each other about what they had read, and had the entire RBA team listen to this dialogue in a 'fish bowl' <sup>(1)</sup> setting. The dialogue was uncensored, unedited, unrehearsed, and candid to the extent that when the group retired for the night the unrest was palpable, without the accusing finger pointing at anyone.

The large group organized itself into six smaller project teams, who each worked on one of the priorities short-listed from the responses. Each team had a learning coach, who would work with the team from the 'outside', not as a 'facilitator' but as a watchful supporter. The coach contracts with the team to focus on both results and their own processes, takes permission to intervene and offer Just-In-Time learning tools to help them in dealing with the twin objectives.

<sup>(1)</sup> Fishbowl is a meeting technique that positions the audience around some central chairs, where a group of 2-plus people have a unrehearsed conversation about a subject that is of particular interest to the audience. This technique is specially appropriate when there are difficult issues to be addressed, concerning the audience, as they can hear "as in a theatre" the opinions of others, without having to give responses, react, or defend themselves. It fosters active listening and lessens the tendency to be judgmental about others' comments.



As a way of integrating other tools in the larger group, several sessions involving all members as a large team, focused on: Reflection and Dialogue, giving and receiving feedback, and use of a High Performing Team Instrument (HPTI) to serve as a reference point for assessing their own functioning as a team.

R&D<sup>(2)</sup> in this group deserves special mention. Dialogue was introduced as a different way of conversing with each other, without judging, or needing to resolve differences between adversaries – it was a way of real listening and gaining an increased understanding of the underlying assumptions that were operating and making visible the tacit fabric of a collective perspective. The RBA experienced something it had never had before: a genuine communication, and within its entire community.

For the first time in its team history, there appeared to be the dawning of a possible reality everyone had deeply desired, but was not quite hopeful about. To feel this in the atmosphere was a wonderful experience for me.

Towards the end of the retreat, after the various teams presented the result of their own working over the three days and shared the tools they had learnt, the leadership team offered to become the ‘fish’ of the fishbowl, and have their colleagues listen into an internal dialogue – again, unrehearsed, unedited, candid. Somehow, in the three days, very subtly this spirit of genuine communication had pervaded the group. No specific technique or aspect of design can take credit for this. This is too intricate to be planned; yet it is very squarely rooted in principles of self-awareness, trust, reflection, willingness to listen, and great interest in inclusion, with a perspective that embraces different viewpoints.

<sup>(2)</sup> Reflection & Dialogue is a technique that is used with groups to foster active listening and the creation of an atmosphere of deeper understanding among group members. We apply it with some rules: No judging of other comments, no “ping-pong” conversations, freedom to speak or just listen, speaking from both heart and the mind, time to reflect at the beginning, pausing between one comment and the next. These norms help to create a different kind of conversation, that groups find most unusual. The results are an amazing creation of meaning and a more integral appreciation of others. While it is not a decision making process, many times decisions emerge easier after such a session, especially among polarized teams. The concept of Dialogue comes from the work of David Bohm, and it has been used by Peter Senge as a tool for developing learning communities.

This retreat involved no ‘facilitation’. No directive teaching, no expert consulting, no ‘telling’, no attribution to individual or organizational ‘wrong doing’.

What it did involve was many groups of people having productive conversations, learning and experiencing new tools for improving effectiveness, but deciding for themselves what was appropriate and when. What it did involve was a genuine appreciation for each other’s willingness to operate from their individual and collective realities, and being kinder to themselves than they had been in the past. What it did involve was a group of people beginning to believe that they could redesign their destiny, and committing their energies to increasing productivity and responsiveness to their client base.

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Over the past two and half years LIM has supported the UNDP in a project to develop a network of Learning Managers from all 135 offices. We have facilitated five sessions, each with a group of about 24 Learning Managers from a different developing country. The focus of the work is to support the Learning Managers as they defined their new role, and worked to incorporate learning throughout their organization. The goal of developing Learning Managers was derived from the vision of the Administrator of UNDP, which has as a basic tenet, the aim that every person in the organization, from chauffeurs to Head of Country Office, consciously dedicate 5% of his/her work time to learning.

Each group goes through a 5-day ARL session in different geographical locations, where the focus is to work on: defining the competencies of this new role; defining the operational needs and challenges of the network; developing new learning methodologies to support the ‘5%’ challenge; and solving operational problems facing members of the network.

To build a world-wide network, the Learning Resources Center at UNDP developed technological support with a unique knowledge management tool: the Electronic Platform for Learning (See ARL News # 9, an interview with an EPL leader, Adriana Mendoza). This platform allows Learning Managers from the 135 regional offices to share information, and answer their evolving challenges.



**LIM**

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