

## A new manager's impact on retention after organisational change



For Trócaire's East Africa regional office new strategies and programme approaches brought significant upheaval and change. It was recognised that the changes affected staff morale. Uncertainty and anxiety increased turnover. Senior managers were conscientious of staff needs and support was provided. However it was the arrival of a new regional manager and their different style that transformed the team.

The new regional manager was openly acknowledged by staff to have related to them as people, offering personal disclosures and empathy to build rapport, empowered staff and directly involved them in issues that affected them. As a result staff engagement was improved as there was new energy and positive attitudes. Turnover was seen to improve; demonstrating that a managers style can be a catalyst for improved retention.

### **Introduction to the organisation**

Trócaire is a non-profit making relief and development agency set up by the Irish Catholic Bishops in 1973 to address the concerns of the Irish Catholic Church on the needs and injustices affecting developing countries. Trócaire has two main aims; to help those in need in the developing countries and to make Irish people more aware of these needs and its duty to justice towards them.

Trócaire works in solidarity with local development actors in over 30 countries throughout the developing world. Trócaire Horn and East Africa Regional Office in Nairobi work in six countries namely Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia.

### **Background to change in leadership**

From 2005, Trócaire faced major changes which coincided with the formulation of a new strategic framework. Subsequently the new strategic plan (2006-2016) introduced a new organizational structure and a change from 'projects approach' to a 'programme approach'. This shift entailed a move from funding individual discrete projects (or 'baskets of projects' in a country or region) to supporting and financing a more coherent range of interventions, spanning a number of partners, all contributing to a common objective and platform of action. .

These changes introduced new approaches to work. It also had a significant impact in the programmes approval system, new staff positions, reorganization of some existing staff positions, and in some cases, staff redundancies. The changes directly affected staff morale and increased anxiety to the extent that some staff left the organization. The Horn and East Africa Regional office in particular was affected by the staff departures and the challenges of staff retention.

### **Change of leadership at Trócaire HEARO**

In 2007, there was a change of leadership at Trócaire HEARO. A new Regional Manager was recruited to replace the incumbent who was leaving for another regional office. The outgoing Regional Manager ('Representative' then) had been an excellent manager with

immense development work experience and very supportive to staff. The incoming Regional Manager was able to build upon the supportive environment set by his predecessor. Representing fresh energy, not associated with the painful changes the new manager was better able to manage the staff concerns and anxiety. His approach was considered to be one of transformational leadership and had a significant impact on staff attitudes and behaviour.

### **Evaluation of the by the Regional Manager new approach**

The new Regional Manager used several approaches and methods to understand and support the staff needs. The methods used included the following:

- **Listening:** The new manager spent a lot of time in the initial days at the office meeting, talking and listening to every individual staff member at the Regional Office. The discussions revolved around the personal values, challenges, family issues, work, career plans and the organization generally. It was interesting to note that during these discussions the new manager talked about his own personal issues, including family. This created a sense of openness, trust, and value of the employee, because the employees saw themselves not just as workers but as people with a life and a family that extends beyond the work environment.
- **Mix of formality and informality:** The staff meetings that were convened by the manager were a mixture of formality and informality. A key example is a regional meeting that the staff had in Naivasha to discuss important programme issues. The presentations and the sitting arrangement were informal. Some staff sat comfortably on sofas or just lay on the carpet within the meeting room. Staff reported that they felt that this was one of the best regional meetings ever with greatest outcomes. The manager ensured that there was a balance between formal and informal approaches such that the policies, procedures and values of Trócaire were not compromised.
- **Empowerment:** The manager gave equal attention to all employees junior and senior alike. This ensured a sense of fairness and empowerment of all staff. The same approach was used to create a sense of balanced attention between the national staff and the expatriate staff at the regional office.
- **Representation of HEARO staff issues at HQ level:** The manager actively supported and voiced issues that affected the staff at the regional level. On a number of occasions, the manager advocated for staff based in the region on issues that included terms, conditions, fair chance and career development
- **Effective Communication:** The staff at the region felt more empowered through timely dissemination of information. There was periodic communication by the manager whenever an issue came up or whenever major decisions were made at the head office on issues that may have a direct impact on the staff and their work. Such information was shared openly.

**Conclusion**

*“There were many other approaches that were used by the Regional Manager, these are just a selection of the most noticeable. These approaches increased the level of staff empowerment at the regional office. The negative experience of the organizational changes had had a real impact on retention and potential staff turnover. The manager's style is credited by many staff as mitigating and reversing this trend.”*

Leonard Kwelu Trócaire HR East Africa Regional Office