

Challenges of Team Building at European Institutions

European Patent Office Case Study: Management Committee

The EPO's President Perspective

Alison Brimelow became President of the European Patent Office on 1 July 2007. She and her top team had to hit the ground running. Here, she tells the story of what happened.

When I was elected to the role of President at the European Patent Office, as with most European institutions, I inherited the top team that had served the president before me. As always in these roles, the challenge was, how was I to harness the power of this group of individuals to create an effective team to run the European Patent Office at a time of fundamental change, notably how to address the stark lessons of accrual rather than cash accounting, how to develop useful management information, and how to bring the EPO governance into the 21st century.

Before I came into office, the Management Advisory Committee (MAC) and I decided that we would bring in outside help to help us form an effective team. We saw the need for a longer term process and therefore committed to a series of facilitated offsite meetings that would integrate both our EPO board work agenda and our team development.

Our first MAC offsite therefore started off with two days expert facilitation by Performance Consultants International (PCI). On the first two days we focused on team alignment, learning specific skills that would help us become an effective team. From that early time in our working together as a team we began using the tools that we had learnt.

For example, over the next facilitations and trainings we learned about "appreciative enquiry" and developed a charter of "We work well together when we . . .", (see box below).

Modus Operandi of the MAC

We work well when we:

- turn off our blackberries and mobiles
- complement each other
- show RESPECT
- share ideas at an early stage
- encourage transparency + TRUST
- appreciate + be appreciated
- demonstrate OPENESS + honesty
- take a CAN-DO approach (being constructive); not a CAN'T DO (as a default)
- value + make use of differences
- feel the Common Goal (integrate it)
- understand others
- test + contest ideas
- relax + enjoy!
- accept the job/role is not the person

In between business as usual, we used structured "Time Out" that allowed us to reflect on how we had behaved toward each other and how we might do things differently.

After the initial intervention, each of the top team worked with a coach. We saw transformations around us in the team and individual colleagues. It showed us all that there are different ways of being powerful and effective. It was a delight to see that new joiners also took to the way we did things as well.

One way or another, with PCI's help, we turned into an effective team. Together we worked on items such as tight budget execution, developing "good" governance, effective performance management (starting from zero).

What would I have done differently? I would have done the same again but I also think I would also have had a mentor, someone who could be a guide and sounding board for the personally difficult, as opposed to the corporately difficult. I think that would have been very helpful.

In summary, I would have found the job very difficult to handle without the help I received from PCI.

Alison Brimelow steps down from her role as President on 30 June 2010. She maintains a strong interest and commitment to Europe, and is passionate about encouraging women to step up and take leadership positions.

What We Did
by Performance Consultants International

Overall, the training interventions for the European Patent Office's MAC included a mix of: Facilitation; Team Coaching; Coaching Training; Executive Coaching; Top Team Alignment work; and Values Assessment

Over 18 months we supported the MAC in developing its team alignment and individuals through executive coaching, and also provided ad hoc support in particular situations. In the process we worked with the dynamics of this complex pan-European institution, focusing on its board room and individual challenges, taking the systems perspective required for the design of our interventions at the EPO.

It is always our approach to collaborate and co-create with our clients. Therefore we worked with the President, the President's Office, MAC team and the people supporting this process to draw up the agenda for the offsites.

One key aspect of the work was combining the MAC work on real life issues of the EPO and devoting time to practical interventions including team coaching, coaching train and capability development. For example, the MAC did work on key elements such as on visioning, values, behaviours and stages of team development. In addition, the MAC would run its work meetings and we would provide coaching feedback on these. The additional 1:1 coaching for individual MAC members allowed for behind the scenes development and extra support for this. Overall, the interventions were designed to:

- Develop and support the MAC as a whole and each individual MAC member
- Support the leadership role of the president
- Help the MAC become an effective top team in tackling the key challenges facing the EPO
- Generate a team spirit, shift perspectives and behaviours from instructive to a coaching and mutually supportive leadership style
- Use Executive Coaching to develop individuals and help with day to day challenges
- Build the capacity, coaching skills and commitment for self-development at individual, peer-2-peer, and team level
- Create practical tools and embed behaviours that allow individuals' full contribution to the team

In working with the MAC team facilitators helped the team to flow and work really well together over time. As the case of the EPO shows, it is very important to devote time and resources in a long-term processes. We are grateful for the vision of Alison Brimelow and her team and the personal commitment that each of the MAC members made to the success of this work.

About the European Patent Organisation

The European Patent Organisation is an intergovernmental organisation that was set up on 7 October 1977 on the basis of the European Patent Convention (EPC). It has two bodies, the European Patent Office with over 6,000 staff and the Administrative Council, which supervises the Office's activities. The Organisation currently has 37 member states. As the Patent Office for Europe, its mission is to support innovation, competitiveness and economic growth across Europe through its core activities the examination of patent applications and the grant of European patents, and other activities such as the provision of patent information and training services.

www.epo.org

About Performance Consultants International

Performance Consultants is the leading coaching, leadership and performance improvement firm in the workplace globally. It provides advisory, coaching, leadership transformation and sustainability services in selected markets worldwide. Its purpose is to unlock human potential and integrate strategy, leadership, culture and sustainability by generating higher levels of individual and collective awareness and responsibility to grow people, performance and purpose.

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