

ACTION LEARNING SCENARIO #1

“Less with Less” – The Communications and Leadership Challenge



Sponsors:

Bob Doyle, Barbara Wainman, Jess Weaver, & Leslie McElroy

Team Leader:

Dave Helweg

Coach:

Tim Miller

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As salary and facilities costs continue to increase, as external demands on funds for enterprise systems grow, and as our budgets stay relatively flat, our operating funds continue to shrink. What does the future of USGS look like? How can we position the USGS to thrive in the face of these fiscal pressures? While none of us has a crystal ball it does not take a psychic to divine that funding for domestic discretionary programs in government is not likely to increase in the near future nor keep pace with growing public demand for products and services. This government-wide fiscal reality is unfortunately being experienced at a time when USGS has positioned itself, both in the Department and in Congress, to compete quite effectively for resources. However, the scope of new resources is limited, especially for discretionary programs. The budget realities are not of our making, but that does not make them any less real.

In January Director Chip Groat sent a message to all employees concerning the FY 2005 budget entitled “Doing Less with Less”. This message, while necessarily conveying some difficult budget realities, was intended to be an honest and candid assessment of the current situation and to announce his plans to begin developing a strategy for the future. It was intended to recognize the strain put on our people by continuing to strive to “do more with less” and to commit to develop a bureau-level strategy to deal with this fiscal reality. It was, at its core, an honest recognition that we must take steps to prioritize our activities and consider scaling back in some areas, not merely continue to rely on cost-cutting measures such as reducing travel and training. At the same time Chip emphasized that the quality of our science will in no way be diminished.

Doing “less with less” is not a prescription to cut everything evenly across the board – an approach that treats all programs, offices, and functions equally regardless of performance or mission significance. It is intended to get USGS focused on what is core to our mission. In some cases this could result in a recommendation to do more in a given area and less in another. It demands that we as a bureau prioritize our work and make some tough choices.

Some employees received this message in the spirit it was intended, while others did not. In some corridors it was hailed for its openness and honesty, while in other parts of the organization it was viewed as one more negative message from the 7th floor in Reston. The “Less with Less” concept presents an intriguing communications challenge in terms of organizational need and employee understanding. Since sending out that message, Chip has continued to consult with the ELT and has formed a team under the leadership of Deputy Director Bob Doyle to “develop a course of action that will enable the USGS to face the future with a sustainable approach to staffing, programs and operations in the face of level or declining availability of appropriated funds.” That team’s work may in fact be completed by the time you are tackling this problem, but their job is to develop recommendations for specific actions to be taken, guidelines to follow and best practices to emulate on a bureau-wide basis. Your job is to help us communicate this message and more importantly to make it work for USGS, to institutionalize a management and decision process that will sustain the organization well into the future.

What do your friends and colleagues in USGS want to hear about the future of their agency? How do they want to receive that message? How can the ELT engage all employees in this process? How can we get buy-in that this process is necessary to sustain the [future] health and vitality of the USGS? And most importantly how do we institutionalize a process of looking at how we spend our resources to position the USGS to continue to provide the highest quality science that is relevant to societal issues.

This is a leadership issue. With decreasing budgets and the Director charging us to “Do Less with Less,” how do we continue to create a leadership-centered culture? How can all parts of the organization help to spread the leadership message, communicate the fiscal realities, and focus on the excellence of the science? How can the graduates of leadership training reach out to others in their offices and within the organization to spread the leadership principles and the philosophy of doing less with less while working in their circle of influence? How can grassroots efforts such as the Central Region Leadership Group (CRLG) and the Reston Leadership Group (RLG), as well as small groups around the country, help with this issue?

How can we lead up, down, and across to continue to create a leadership-centered culture while doing less with less? How can we reach leaders at every level of the organization? What are the benefits to the mission of the USGS to continue to create a leadership-centered culture? How can we meet the goals of science excellence through leadership excellence?

As you tackle this issue several documents, which may be useful, are Chip’s all employee email “Doing Less with Less” (Attachment 5) which can be found on the intranet at:

<http://internal.usgs.gov/director/memo01282005.html>;

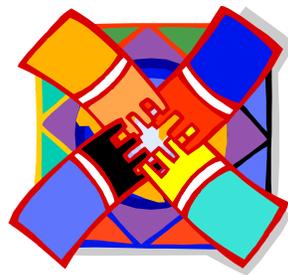
and the report on Cost/FTE Distribution which came out of the March 2004 Austin Manager’s meeting. That report can be found on the intranet at:

<http://internal.usgs.gov/director/>

Additionally the following references may help you with the issue and challenges of this Action Learning Scenario:

References:

- “Improving Work Life” by Dan Sussman – T&D, March 2005 (Attachment 1)
- “Managing Your Boss” by J. Gabarro and J. Kotter – Harvard Business Review, January 2005 (Attachment 2)
- Mission statement and function of the Reston Leadership Group (Attachment 3)
- Information on the Central Region Leadership Group (Attachment 4)



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