

ONLINE INSIGHTS

Oxford Organisational Effectiveness Programme



Oxford programme helps public affairs chief chart new course for business practice

Roy Wells, President/CEO, Triad Strategies

Roy Wells is no stranger to the concept of purpose. In fact, it permeates his leadership as President of Triad Strategies, a successful Pennsylvania-based public affairs firm.

Established in 2002, the firm carries out government relations and PR for clients such as the Hershey Trust Company and Independence Blue Cross.

A life-long learner, Roy has used the principles of management thought-leaders such as Simon Sinek and Bill George to help him build high-performance teams. But when he launched a new practice for trade associations, something happened that he didn't expect. 'Managing trade associations and supporting their members posed a unique opportunity for us,' he says. 'We believed that we could grow by selling our public affairs and communications skills in that space.'

But rather than taking off in the way that he had hoped, the practice began to underperform.

'I knew fairly early on that something was off,' he explains. 'While we picked up clients fairly easily, I could see that we were not providing the value that they were expecting.'

As he and his leadership team tried to figure out some answers, some comments on an online book forum piqued his curiosity.

'I had taken part in the [online Oxford Executive Leadership Programme](#),' he says. 'The Head Tutor, Steve Mostyn, ran an online book club for participants. One day he presented a new book *Align* – by [Jonathan Trevor](#).'

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The need for alignment

'I already understood the idea of personal alignment from my own leadership journey. But I hadn't thought about it in an organisational sense. Or how you apply it down the value chain – from your overall purpose down to the computer software that you are using.'

Feeling that it was a natural progression for his learning, he joined the online Oxford Organisational Effectiveness Programme (previously Strategic Alignment), which is based on the principles outlined in Trevor's book.

'As I jumped into the programme, I realised that we needed to reassess some of the assumptions that we had made before launching the new association management practice. We believed that our existing flat team structure and products would work in this new market. But in fact, association management needs a more hierarchical than the flat structure which served our other clients. Providing consultancy solely at board level – and utilising a team approach without a hierarchical structure – was simply not working.'

Roy used his learnings from the programme to open a new conversation with his top team.

'We concluded that the association management division was not in alignment with everything else we were doing. On one level we were hiring people to do one job, then asking them to adapt to the association management model. It made us step back and consider bigger questions. If it was not in alignment with our purpose, should we make association management into a separate company? Or break it out into a different division with different systems and ways of motivating people?'

Roy and his team are considering acquiring an association management company. After this, they will decide whether to move their existing clients into a separate entity or keep them within the existing company structure. 'Understanding that purpose needs to find its way through the value chain is transformational. It has also helped to validate the model we were using to motivate employees and build culture. It's not about being critical. Rather it's a new way of thinking, of re-testing assumptions and re-evaluating facts.'

The need to see the big picture

A self-described 'big-picture' thinker, the programme also helped Roy to reflect on the link between effective processes and business growth. 'I realised that we wouldn't be able to scale in the way that we wanted unless we focused on the weakest link in the value chain. For instance, if you are using a manual expenses system, people spend time worrying about how they are going to get reimbursed, instead of collaborating or delivering value to clients.'

'But I also recognise that processes need to underpin growth, not just support where you are today. If you double your staff numbers, you don't want systems that fall over. For example, even before COVID, we had recognised that we needed to put in the systems and technology for people to collaborate in multiple locations.' Asked how the programme has changed his mindset, Roy says that the concepts have now become part of his DNA. 'It's like learning to ride a bike – you just go back and remember what you need to do. My thinking has become more intentional and strategic as a result. Whenever we need to make a decision, it helps me to evaluate how it affects things across the board.'

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