

Positioning Human Resources in ActionAid

Brazil - a Case Study

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Why did you want to create a Human Resource (HR) function? Were there problems arising from a lack of HR?

Historically HR had fallen under the finance team's remit, with payroll being its main purpose. Any policy work was done by translating global ActionAid policies into Portuguese and sharing them with staff. The HR issues were dealt with on an ad hoc and needs-related basis. This worked initially because the country programme was still small.

However, with a rapidly growing organisation, HR-related issues started to arise and being reactive to these problems was no longer sufficient. The need to establish HR processes and procedures to solve short-term problems, ensure the efficient administration of routine functions (i.e. no standardised personnel filing systems were in place), anticipate long-term problems, and strategically meet performance goals and objectives became a priority for the organisation.

Around this time a new Country Director joined ActionAid Brazil who understood the importance of having an HR function and the benefits of having a professional and proactive team looking after staff; this resulted in our first HR Coordinator being recruited. This decision was supported by the staff who, during a staff survey at that time, had stated that they wanted a specific HR person who understood HR policies and their needs.

Did you use People in Aid resources particularly when creating an HR function? How have they helped? What has been most useful?

Unfortunately ActionAid was not affiliated with People in Aid at the time we created our HR function. However, People In Aid has been a great resource of information as we have needed to develop various tools, policies and procedures.

What were the first steps? How long did it take from inception to creation? When did you bring staff in?

From the beginning it was important to us to keep the lines of communication open with all staff and to build a department based on the needs of ActionAid Brazil and its staff.

With the new Country Director in place, he undertook a restructuring which looked at each department and budget. As part of the restructuring, a staff survey was undertaken, 1:1 interviews were conducted and information was gathered about each department. From this it was clear that an HR function was both needed and wanted.

With a dedicated HR person in place the following two actions were carried out to assess and prioritise what was needed from HR:

- A review of the existing Staff Handbook, policies and procedures

- A brief audit to assess the alignment of HR with State, Federal, and Local Municipality rules, regulation, and policies.

With this information to hand work started on the internal HR policies, which included meeting with staff to find out their needs in relation to the policies. A few quick wins/changes were implemented immediately i.e. salary payment increases.

We are continuously improving our HR policies, procedures and ways of working with communication being the key to ensuring staff are involved in our work. To this effect we have in place a regular email called “HR Inform” that is sent to staff from HR to keep them updated on what we are doing and inviting them to get involved.

What does being committed to the People In Aid Code mean to you and your staff?

For ActionAid Brazil being committed to the People In Aid Code means delivering effective HR management and affirming our commitment and recognition to staff, volunteers and partners within Action Aid Brazil.

What advice would you have for others who are embarking on the process of building an HR function?

Each organisation is going to have a different reason for needing an HR function. These are some suggestions for planning the process:

- Identify what the HR needs are (survey or audit) and plan for a follow-up review to see if you have been successful and added value.
- Build your plans in three phases; immediate impact projects (quick wins), short-term projects, and longer-term projects.
- Your plans will probably be disrupted. Build that into your timelines.
- Don't underestimate how much information your staff needs and wants.
- Do your best to not become the “office cop” – the hardest role you have is balancing the organisations needs (legally and from a reputation perspective) and the people's needs.
- Finally, the top three skills you should use on a daily basis: talk, listen, and learn.

Finally, for you personally, what differences or similarities do you find between the private and public/NGO sector concerning HR?

In my opinion when it comes to HR the differences are minimal; Human Resources Management is an important asset to any sector. HR will always provide and be responsible for:

- Effectively communicating with staff members
- Managing change
- Facilitating learning and development
- Recruitment, selection and employee relations
- Remuneration and benefits
- Building the capacity and capability of staff to achieve their full potential