Learning on the Run 19: Role Negotiation
How to help develop the roles and responsibilities within a senior management team?

The Request. A relatively new Director of a City Department of Transportation was unhappy with the department's ability to move forward on it's capital improvement plan. He wanted to build a senior management team that would create a high-performance organization. His request was to help create a frank two-way feedback process with his direct reports to clarify role expectations and build collaboration for improved results.

Larger Context. The Mayor had been dismayed with the Department of Transportation's performance for the last 3 years. The Department of Transportation seemed unable to come close to spending it's allotted capital improvement budget due to what was perceived to be mismanagement. The Mayor hired a new director with the expectation that this would change. After 6 months on the job, the Director was ready to take his relationships with senior division managers to another level and create a team that could receive and provide feedback to him and each other. He wanted a collaborative approach to resolving cross-division issues that were barriers to timely results.

Consulting Intervention. After an initial meeting to introduce the role negotiation process, each direct report and the Director agreed to respond to a set of feedback questions. The question set was essentially:

1. What expectations do you have of yourself?
2. Are there any things you've been wanting to do but haven't had the opportunity to really consider or try out?
3. Are there any important role or responsibility issues that need to be resolved in your mind?
4. What expectations do you have of [Name]/Director?

Their responses were exchanged with each other in preparation for a one-to-one meeting with the Director. Everyone agreed to follow a role negotiation model (1) in discussion of high priority items. At the conclusion of the meeting, they would agree on what to share with the entire senior management team. The consultant was present to help facilitate the conversation as necessary and write up the tentative agreements and notes including follow-up actions and deadlines.

At a special senior management team meeting, each participant reported on their written agreements about roles, responsibilities, work program objectives, behavioral expectations, and authorities that were agreed upon at their bilateral meetings with the Director. Other team members were asked to react to the reports to create additional clarity and action items. Each report developed a set of agreements incorporating feedback from the other team members. These were used for subsequent follow-up meetings with the Director and to communicate their role expectations to the staff that reported to them.

Last Line. Role negotiation with a new team helps support open communication for continued feedback and relationship building among team members.

(1) The role negotiation process was adapted from: Harrison, R. Role negotiation. In: Bennis, W. (Ed.), *Interpersonal dynamics: Essays and reading on human interaction*. Homewood, Ill: Dorsey Press, 1973.