



THE CASE OF THE MISSING RESULTS

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The Environmental Sustainability Agency* (ESA) is a mid-sized government body that maintains a large estate of parks and wild ecological zones. Principled in pursuing its aims, it was also regarded as preachy and self-righteous in its dealings with others. As a result, nearly 30% of baseline funding was cut by successive administrations over a 6-year period, and the ESA was forced to become more entrepreneurial. It was told it must generate returns from its parks, and work with operators who help fund its activities.

The organization responded first by cutting peripheral programs, squeezing operational efficiencies and freezing all new hires. As funding cuts continued, the top leadership accepted that to survive fundamental change had to occur. A three-phase plan called for co-funding of programs with corporate sponsors, a cost-cutting reorganization, reducing non-core programs and cutting staff numbers, and creating a cultural shift to a commercial and fiscally disciplined mindset. This message was a cultural abomination.

The finance team was core, as the plan required them to educate staff and managers, build new financial management tools, and become close partners with line management. At planning retreats and regular top-table meetings the Finance Director not only helped build the plan, but was exceptionally supportive; all could see he worked diligently for the cause.

But he and his team failed over and over again to deliver the tools, guidance, and support that the turnaround plan required. Operating much as they always had, finance developed a reputation as isolated and defensive amid layoffs and heart-wrenching change.

THE PEOPLE ARE THE TEAM

We profiled the individuals of the finance team and generated a comprehensive view of the whole group. We looked at the team through the lens of the five roles that people play on a team.

Results Role - People who are keen to drive forward and get things done, who like to win, and who take on the role of directing the team.

Relationships Role - People with a focus on connections, personal involvement, and networking. They empathize with others and understand how those outside the team will see things.

Process Role - People with a focus on structure and ensuring there is a process for implementation. They will be the ordered, conscientious, and detail-focused team members.

Innovation Role - People who are creative and envision the future of where the team could go. They have a focus on change, vision, and ideas.

Pragmatist Role - People who are grounded and straightforward, who prefer real world experience to theory and unconventional thinking.

* This is a real case, although the agency name has been changed.

This picture of the team as a whole provides a visceral sense of how it will tend to behave, and allows us to surmise how the team will be seen by others. Let's walk through the implications of the team profile.



The finance team was the antithesis of natural born team players. Not one person was able to play the relationships role or the innovation role, and only a few in the results role. The team report predicted three key behaviors that would get in the way of their task:

First, the team preferred to be told what to do, and lacked drive and energy. It would come across as reactive and passive.

Second, it would avoid building connection. Talkative meetings with line colleagues were frustrating and irrelevant, and expecting the team to spend time on outreach was always a stretch.

Third, they were the opposite of visionary and creative. The hope it would develop innovative and useful tools to help managers monitor their budgets and spending was unlikely. When it came to producing new ideas they simply weren't capable.

The profile also enabled the team to see itself as others did – and to develop conscious and deliberate actions to change. This was difficult and felt unnatural but, with effort, coaching, and strong measurement, the team responded.

While it's common for functional work groups to attract people who have a similar makeup – for example research has reliably shown that accountants en masse really are boring¹ – such homogeneity may intensify weaknesses or can lead to overplaying strengths. Understanding the task and matching it with people who can perform appropriately is always the rule².

¹Levy, J. J., Richardson, J. D., Lounsbury, J. W., Stewart, D., Gibson, L. W., & Drost, A. W. (2011). Personality Traits and Career Satisfaction of Accounting. *Individual Differences Research*, 238-249.

²Hollenbeck, J. R., DeRue, D. S., & Guzzo, R. (2004). Bridging the gap between I/O research and HR practice: Improving team composition, team training, and team task design. *Human Resource Management*, 43(4), 353-366. <http://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20029>