



ASHRIDGE

Developing internal virtual  
action learning facilitators for  
sustainable development  
across the globe



Developing leadership capability is a priority for most organisations, but for a charity whose investment decisions have the power to transform lives, that priority becomes critical.

Jacqui Thomassen speaks to WaterAid to explore their challenges and approach to finding solutions.

**Words** Jacqui Thomassen

**W**aterAid is an international non-governmental organisation whose sole focus is to improve poor people's access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation. WaterAid is also a complex and ambitious organisation which plans to reach a further 25 million people directly with water and sanitation by 2015. As an organisation that is primarily funded through voluntary donations, effective spending is crucial: WaterAid's strategy to achieve their goal was clearly defined and required meticulous delivery.

The charity had identified that developing a culture of influential leadership was a key requirement in delivering the real results that they wanted to see on the ground. Working in 26 countries across Africa, Asia and the Pacific region, often in remote locations with limited resources, posed a challenge that organisations across all industries may increasingly come to recognise as business environments become more globalised and resources are squeezed, whether for efficiency, sustainability or austerity reasons.

Investing in a three day, intensive leadership training programme was a

vital part in developing the global leadership team, but only fulfilled part of the solution as Claire Newman, Head of Leadership and Engagement at WaterAid explains:

"Through the three day programme we had identified top performers, instilled key leadership behaviours and created a global momentum of shared learning. But what would happen when we got home and the day to day challenges of every day jobs crept back in? With no immediate support, I was concerned that isolation may lead to a return to old habits."

**Claire had identified the challenges that face HR and OD professionals everywhere: How can you make learning stick, apply theory to practice and ensure return on investment?** Both the dispersed nature of the organisation and the limitations of funding highlighted the immediacy of these challenges.

Action learning, where a small group of people work together on real challenges, pooling their knowledge and skills to find solutions, appeared to provide a further piece to the puzzle, but Claire identified that the specific solution for WaterAid would be to develop their own team of Action Learning Facilitators. By developing coaching skills and building on

support and challenge techniques, a small group of individuals would have the potential to enhance the learning of the immediate Global Leadership Team (Senior 60 leaders within WaterAid) as well as leaders of the future. The locations that WaterAid operates in meant that any programme would not only have to be delivered entirely virtually but the skills the individuals had to develop also would have to be tailored to work in the virtual world.

Searching for a solution, Claire connected with Ghislaine Caulat of Ashridge Consulting, whose research and extensive experience in the area of virtual actual learning facilitation is recognised as world-leading. Ghislaine and Claire collaborated to design a programme that would meet WaterAid's requirements both short and long term.

Ghislaine explains: "WaterAid's approach to partner on this project was a really exciting opportunity. **I recognised that developing a small team of Virtual Action Learning Facilitators would be a truly sustainable solution for them** – not just in terms of budget and travel, people and time, but by embedding this learning within the organisation and developing their internal capabilities."

The six participants on the programme, all members of the Global Leadership Team, nominated themselves and were based in the UK, Bangladesh, Mali, Australia and India.

"I interviewed all the individuals by phone initially, as it was important to ensure each had a minimum understanding of group dynamics and facilitation, and also to understand their expectations and motivations for participating. And of course to assess their English language capabilities, to ensure the group could meaningfully work together. Only once these interviews were complete did I define the programme, tailored to the participants' and the organisation's requirements."

The programme required a genuine commitment from all the participants as the programme is necessarily intensive. Following the phone interviews the group came together on WebEx, a desktop web conferencing and online meeting system, to work together over three consecutive days, for four hours per session.



Photography: WaterAid/Suzanne Porter

Phase 1	Phase 2: VALF Workshop (three sessions of 4 hours each on three consecutive days)	Phase 3: Three follow-up sessions between October and January
Briefing and contracting session	Developing skills and capabilities	Virtual Action Learning Facilitation in Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree design and outcome of the sessions so everyone owns the programme</li> <li>• Agree times of day</li> <li>• Developing "rules"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practical exercises</li> <li>• Reflection</li> <li>• Input</li> <li>• Group facilitated by Ghislaine</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each member asked to facilitate the group as they work on real challenges</li> <li>• Peer feedback</li> <li>• Ghislaine observes and feeds back</li> </ul>

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Claire, who both instigated and participated in the programme, found it a wholly positive experience:

**"I was surprised by how long we could stay engaged in a virtual space – the time passed quickly and without distraction."**

Checking-in properly was crucial to this – relaxation exercises, getting into the space, taking a proper break – the dynamic works really well. It's different when everyone is operating virtually, it's incredibly powerful. We were all surprised that none of us felt anything was lacking, or could have been achieved more effectively by meeting physically."

Reservations felt by those for whom English wasn't their first language were quickly dispelled too, Fatim Haidara, Country Representative from Mali, was excited by the opportunity to learn new skills and become more innovative and creative:

"This opportunity made me part of a new network which would support me in my daily work and staff management. By improving my team's performance I knew we would see more results and impacts on vulnerable people in Mali. If I was concerned about my English skills at the start, the group fortified me and I now feel close to people I have never met. We established mutual support and confidence which



Photography: WaterAid/Layton Thompson

WaterAid's vision is of a world where everyone has access to safe water and sanitation. The international organisation works in 26 countries across Africa, Asia and the Pacific region to transform lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation in some of the world's poorest communities. Over the past 30 years, WaterAid has reached 14.38 million people with safe water and, since 2004, 9.4 million people with sanitation. For more information, visit [www.wateraid.org](http://www.wateraid.org)

A further update on the impact of WaterAid's work with Ashridge will be available in the Autumn edition of *Converse*, the magazine for Ashridge Consulting: [www.ashridge.org.uk/converse](http://www.ashridge.org.uk/converse)

enabled us to find solutions to most of the questions raised. From now on we have a friendly network who collaborate virtually and honestly by sharing experience."

The programme's success lies not just in its impact in the virtual space, but the facilitation skills acquired are transferable in the physical space too. Fatim explains:

"Now, I can facilitate meetings more successfully, by asking the right questions and by supporting everyone in resolving their problems. I also developed the capacity of the senior management team by sharing my experience with them and helping them to practise, as I had done.

"My listening skills in English have improved through "VALF" and I take part in bilingual discussions without calling upon translators. During the last Regional Meeting, I facilitated one day with all the participants (approximately 25 people) in English and it was wonderful. It was a true success story. **In short, it has allowed the country programme to optimise its resources and its results.**"

WaterAid is now rolling out the learning as individuals begin to apply the skills to real challenges in their regions.

Ghislaine summarises:  
 "Six people have learnt how to facilitate a certain type of learning intervention virtually. In this instance in the context of a leadership programme, but longer term, this can be applied to other types of development. The opportunities for WaterAid to continue to see a return on this programme means that it has been a much more effective learning investment."

“It's different when everyone is operating virtually, it's incredibly powerful”



Photography: WaterAid/Eva-Lotta Jansson