Main Roads Western Australia at a Glance

- Main Roads Western Australia (WA), which has 1,000 employees, works closely with its portfolio colleagues and local government to plan, build and maintain an integrated and efficient world-class road transport network in excess of 18,500 kilometers.

- It manages A$41 billion of assets (road assets valued at A$39 billion) that support the needs of all road users across the state.

- Over the 2010–11 financial year, the value of assets under its control increased by A$2.4 billion to almost A$41 billion, including A$39 billion representing roads and related assets. During the year, the organization invested A$383 million in new roads and other infrastructure assets, and an additional A$814 million was spent on asset management, maintaining the road network across the state, grants and subsidies to local government and other bodies, and depreciation of the road network.

- Main Roads WA is an agency of the government of WA that is responsible for implementing the state’s policies on road access and main roads.

- The department manages more than 17,800 kilometers of roads, representing the arterial road network in WA.

Executive Summary

In planning its “2k12” strategy in 2007, Main Roads WA recognized that leadership needed to be a key focus area if it were to realize the organization’s strategic goals and attract and retain the best talent, given the WA resources boom. Considered critical, leadership was incorporated into the organization’s vision: “Main Roads is a forward-thinking organization, with participative leadership where people are empowered to make a difference.”

It developed a strategic focus on inspiring leadership, with the objective of creating an environment that develops and recognizes leadership throughout the organization. To implement this vision, the agency developed eight principles of leadership based on consultation with academic institutions, a research review and manager interviews. These leadership principles were used to create a leadership competency framework, leadership checklist and leadership development programs for graduates, middle managers, senior managers, emerging leaders and high potentials.

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To attract employees’ attention and to inspire conversation, Main Roads WA used creative brochures, appealing imagery and clear communications to get the leadership messages across. Main Roads has also gone to great lengths to embed leadership into not only HR people management practices, but also organization-wide strategic initiatives and even how meetings are run. This culminated in the “Better Business” project, which required leadership on the part of many across the organization and enabled the agency to achieve the government’s 3% efficiency target dividend.

**SETTING THE CONTEXT**

In 2007, Main Roads developed a new strategy called “2k12.” A boom in the resource sector in WA was creating significant challenges in attraction and retaining right skill capability. In addition, the agency identified other areas of potential future challenge that it would need to focus on in order to thrive: making growth work with the community, providing the right growth for Western Australia, creating its workforce of the future, inspiring leadership and enhancing relationships.

Main Roads recognized leadership as the lynchpin of its efforts to implement its 2k12 strategy – it needed to focus on leadership and maintain leadership credibility internally and externally in the community in order to reach the organization’s goals. Even now, as the agency is developing its next strategic plan, “2k20,” leadership is again acknowledged as the really important issue for the organization.

**DESIGNING THE SOLUTION**

Main Roads has a strong tradition of leadership, and the development of the 2k12 strategy was designed to maximize potential in that area. In order to identify the best way of strengthening leadership at Main Roads, the agency undertook significant research into leadership development.

First, the organization used an employee survey to better understand peoples’ perceptions and feelings about leadership at different levels in the organization. Ten years of research were also reviewed to understand better what was working well and what needed improvement. Planners looked at the external environment and different theoretical frameworks, and collaborated with academic institutions in WA to build a robust leadership development program. The agency also interviewed a cross-section of managers and employees to identify possible areas for improvement in its middle-manager development program.

This extensive research resulted in the identification of eight leadership principles, some of which replaced older concepts. “Facilitation leadership” was changed to “inspiring leadership” because research showed that people wanted more inspiring leadership. Planners also identified a number of actions and initiatives to reinforce leadership principles, such as “inspiring others to create change” and promoting “leadership for all.” A conscious effort was made to say that it doesn’t really matter where employees sit within the organization – everyone has the opportunity to demonstrate leadership.
To reinforce its new focus on inspiring leadership, Main Roads implemented several new tools and programs. It created a leadership checklist to guide leaders in decision making, behaviors and values-based management. The checklist documents leadership and relationship principles as well as corporate values. It established monthly executive meetings to reinforce the inspiring leadership checklist.

Main Roads also created agency-specific development programs for those with graduate degrees, middle managers, senior managers/executives and emerging leaders/high potentials. Each program encompasses four key topics: values, innovation, leadership and strategy. As part of development and assessment, the agency identified the competencies and behaviors that link to the different levels in the organization.

The agency uses individual development plans as a performance appraisal tool. In addition, Lunch and Learn sessions demonstrate particular leadership tools and techniques to give people the opportunity to expand their thinking. Main Roads linked leadership to its attraction and retention programs so that leadership skills are seen not as something separate but as integral to talent management and just as important as technical skills.

To help develop leadership competencies, the agency formed corporate executive subcommittees that give emerging leaders exposure to corporate thinking and corporate issues. It also developed active learning opportunities for them that enabled management to evaluate how effectively these projects helped participants gain leadership competencies. For example, when the WA government announced a 3% efficiency dividend for all government organizations, Main Roads formed a cross-organizational team led by a senior manager to identify where cuts should be made. Rather than asking executives to identify efficiencies, the team solicited suggestions for this Better Business project from across the organization, generating more than 2,000 submissions. From these, the project team chose 107 recommendations and nominated responsibility across the organization for implementing them. This was viewed as a really good opportunity to reinforce the leadership messages and get everyone to work as a team.

Finally, because Main Roads wanted leadership to be really practical and visible, it looked at how to integrate it into every aspect of the organization. As part of this effort, the leadership checklist is used as a reference tool in employee relations, multiple links to its Learning and Development programs and competencies linked to innovation. Senior managers are assessed on leadership competencies as part of the 360-degree feedback tools, and the agency has created a comprehensive workforce management succession and planning process linked to leadership assessment.

MAKING AN IMPACT

The impact of Main Road’s leadership strategy is evident in the success of many of its initiatives. The development program has led to the development of creative solutions to several agency challenges. Moreover, participants in the programs have taken their learnings back to their roles and workplaces to challenge current thinking and apply knowledge.

Main Road’s Better Business project was a great example of how its focus on leadership development is strengthening the agency. With strong commitment from people at all levels of the organization, the agency was able to meet the government’s requirement to trim 3% from its budget while doing so in a way that was well-aligned with its priorities.

The agency is measuring the impact of leadership development programs over the short, mid and long terms through progress on individual development plans, 360-degree feedback and a competency-based system linked to the agency’s human capital management program.

The agency recently achieved silver status on a business excellence survey assessment.
LESSONS LEARNED

• Support is required at all levels – a CEO and a Champion at every level.
• Leadership development is not a destination; it’s a journey.
• You must have clear messaging to support leadership development – something people can identify with and something that is reinforced in everything the organization does.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

• Link to the vision of the organization and/or strategy.
• Constantly work on inspiring people, making things fresh and interesting since people are busy, and capturing employees’ attention amid the variety of tasks they are performing.
• Start from the core and build from there. You are not going to be able to do it overnight.

MERCER WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING FOR THIS INTERVIEW:
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