

## Forced Change in State Government: A CRISIS TALE

### Context:

Following hurricane Irene in 2011, large swaths of a New England state suffered severe destruction. As a consequence, the new governor and his administration were left in turmoil trying to quickly respond to a population and government employees in crisis. To quickly relocate government staff and attend to the needs of storm battered constituents, three agencies were moved into a single building in the state capital. The building was in the midst of a remodeling project initiated to quickly convert the structure to an open office design; and therefore, accommodate significantly increased occupancy while providing an improved work environment.

### Engagement Scope:

The change intervention involved helping the governor's administration and top officials at three state agencies to effectively collaborate in an effort to lead large-scale, forced change under crisis conditions. Challenges for this intervention included the need to: 1) create change transition awareness and facilitate the support needed from agency leads, executive leaders, human resources, and front line managers to successfully navigate technical and human transitions; 2) create change management strategies to accommodate imposed change in the public sector; and 3) establish and guide the type of communication needed to ensure effective change management and decision-making across and within the agencies.

Individual Coaching – each member of the leadership team received individual coaching to identify specific behaviors that they wanted to focus on changing, that were based on feedback from an assessment and the survey.

### Results:

The project suffered early setbacks due to the administration's decision to move quickly to relocate government employees, thereby limiting early communication and information sharing among key stakeholders at the onset of the project. This early lack of communication caused a fundamental loss of trust and confidence in leadership among staff at a critical time. As a consequence, in the early phase strong resistance to the change quickly developed resulting in numerous leadership challenges.

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### Results (continued):

Phase two of the project witnessed a dramatic turnaround prompted by the hiring of a seasoned project manager and transition consultants who immediately constructed a solid communication network between essential players and frontline staff. Based on data collected at the close of the project, government employees indicated they were on their way to adjusting to their new workspace and agency neighbors. Collaboration had been dramatically improved and skepticism witnessed in the beginning of the project had been largely overcome. Managers expressed enthusiasm and appreciation for meeting with colleagues to share challenges, success, strategies, and opportunities. Employees, if begrudgingly, indicated they were adapting to their new environment and appreciating the more professional atmosphere. As one agency director reported, "Our people like the more professional work environment, they are even dressing better!"

In summary, the governor's team witnessed the consequences of not attending to people through the change process, and, with assistance from a seasoned project manager and transition specialists, now appreciates the need to incorporate lessons learned in the planning and execution of all of the state's large-scale, change projects.

