

Rockwood Leadership Program

Case Study

Rainforest Action Network

Christopher Hatch, Executive Director

The Rockwood Leadership Program has worked closely with Rainforest Action Network (RAN) for the past four years as the organization negotiated the often-challenging transition from a founder-led group to a sustainable organization. Over this time, RAN engaged with Rockwood through a variety of trainings and customized consultations. Senior staff of RAN has participated in the *Art of Leadership* and are continuing their leadership development through the Rockwood advanced course, *Leading from the Inside Out*. In addition, Rockwood has led at least two staff retreats per year for RAN and been available for coaching on an as-needed basis. The practices gained through this work have become an integral part of the RAN culture, resulting in a strong and highly effective organization.

The mission of Rainforest Action Network (RAN) is to protect the Earth's rainforests and support the rights of their inhabitants through education, grassroots organizing, and non-violent direct action. Founded in 1985 by Randall Hayes, a committed and charismatic leader, RAN has played a key role in strengthening the worldwide rainforest conservation movement. RAN supports activists in rainforest countries as well as organizes and mobilizes consumers and community action groups throughout the United States. RAN has been noted for campaigns that raise public and corporate awareness about practices that harm the rainforest such as cattle grazing, logging of old growth timber, and slash and burn agriculture. Within the community of organizations working on rainforest issues, RAN is distinguished by its emphasis on grassroots education and action, its networking capabilities, and its commitment to mobilizing citizen activists to respond quickly and directly to the forces that threaten the rainforests.

Christopher Hatch, executive director of RAN, likens the transition from a founder-led organization to its current configuration to learning to shift from hanging onto a chariot to driving a stagecoach with a strong group of individuals all working together. After founder Randall Hayes stepped down, the intervening phase was marked by a difficult time where distrust developed about the style and scope of the new leadership. A number of people left the organization, including the executive director who preceded Hatch. When Hatch took over two years ago, he faced the major challenge of rebuilding trust and effective communication within the organization. He turned to Rockwood for help.

Hatch knew Rockwood from his previous experience of attending the *Art of Leadership* training while still in the role of Campaign Director at RAN. With a background in activism, Hatch was at the time in the process of accepting his new role as a nonprofit manager. "The first retreat I did was very eye opening for me," commented Hatch. "It gave me real insight into where my real power lies and offered tools for consciously developing my power and ability to be strong in the world."

The lessons learned in that first training would prove to be an invaluable foundation for Hatch as he began the hard work of rebuilding the organization. In many ways, RAN was a typical activist organization with a deep distrust of management tactics and organizational hierarchy. "We had to rebuild a staff and a management team in a hugely distrustful environment. The Year I took over we had had 60% staff turnover. All our

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energy was going into dealing with internal problems.” Hatch’s job was to build trust in leadership by putting the management regime in place that would preserve the flexibility and power of clear decision-making authority while also empowering staff in a way that brought the best of a very talented group forward.

Hatch’s first act was to convene a four-day, off-site retreat for the entire staff facilitated by Rockwood. The challenge, as Hatch articulates it, was to “literally and figuratively sit everyone down in a circle and come back together. We had to find the place where this work is bigger than we are and reinvigorate people around the core mission. The challenge was to rebuild people’s trust that RAN was a place they could do productive work and be protected. They needed to come to believe there was someone on the bridge who had their best interests in mind.”

The four-day retreat proved to be a turning point for the organization. It offered a forum for people to express their feelings and concerns in a safe manner. Through a number of leadership and management exercises, the group built new techniques for working effectively together. With this new foundation in place, Hatch began to shift the organizational structure. “We rebuilt the organization team by team. Our challenge was to build a structure that was both functional and empowering to all the groups.”

Hatch and RAN have continued to use the skills learned with Rockwood on a regular basis. In addition to two Rockwood-led retreats per year, RAN hosts two retreats per year independently. Hatch actively use one-on-one feedback processes when trouble begins to brew in the organization. He has found that this keeps the organization open and continues to build an environment of trust and effectiveness. Over the past two years, Hatch has been able to re-introduce effective hierarchy into the organization within the structural context of teams. “We are very high functioning right now as an organization,” Hatch concludes. “And I am quite sure I would not be able to say that without all of the skills and insights we gained from our work with Rockwood.”