

CASE STUDY: TRANSFORMING GHANA'S BIRTH AND DEATH REGISTRY

In 2017, Ghana's Birth and Death Registry (BDR) found itself at a crossroads. For decades, the agency had been responsible for documenting vital events such as births and deaths, which are essential for national planning and public policy. However, inefficiencies plagued its operations. Citizens in rural areas often traveled long distances to register births or deaths, only to face long queues, missing documents, and manual records riddled with errors. The system's inefficiency meant that many Ghanaians, especially children, went undocumented, creating gaps in the government's ability to plan for healthcare, education, and other social services.

Recognizing the severity of these challenges, the Registrar of the BDR, Reverend Kingsley Asare Addo, took an adaptive leadership approach to transform the agency. Rather than merely upgrading the technology, he identified that the underlying issue was cultural and structural: staff resistance to change, lack of understanding of the importance of registration, and low public trust in government institutions.

Reverend Addo and his team began by conducting nationwide consultations. They visited rural areas, engaged local chiefs, and listened to citizens' frustrations. These interactions revealed that most people saw the process as irrelevant to their daily lives. Additionally, many staff members were resistant to abandoning the familiar manual system, fearing job redundancy.

To gain buy-in, Reverend Addo launched a public campaign titled "Every Birth Counts." This campaign emphasized the importance of birth and death registration for accessing education, healthcare, and legal rights. He made it clear that the transformation was not just about technology but about building a service-oriented agency that citizens could trust.

Rather than rolling out the digital system nationwide, Reverend Addo piloted the project in two regions: Greater Accra and Ashanti. These regions were chosen for their diverse demographics and infrastructure. The pilot introduced an online registration portal and mobile units that visited remote communities weekly.

The leadership team understood that staff resistance stemmed from fear and lack of skills. They organized workshops where employees learned to use digital systems, with a focus on how technology would enhance their work rather than replace it. Early adopters were celebrated and rewarded, setting an example for others.

Reverend Addo partnered with international organizations, including UNICEF and the World Bank, to secure funding and technical support. He also collaborated with local chiefs and faith-based organizations to educate communities on the benefits of registration.

In 2018, Reverend Addo personally led a registration drive in the Northern Region, a traditionally underserved area. During a town hall meeting, he shared a personal story about a woman who could not claim inheritance rights for her children because they lacked birth certificates. The emotional appeal resonated with the audience and reinforced the importance of documentation.

This grassroots engagement, combined with the availability of mobile registration units, significantly increased participation. Within a year, the number of registered births in the Northern Region increased by 40%.

By 2020, the Birth and Death Registry had transformed its operations. Over 85% of births and deaths in urban areas were registered digitally. Rural registrations increased by 50% due to mobile units.

The agency's public image improved, with citizens praising its efficiency and transparency.

The transformation demonstrated how adaptive leadership, with a focus on engaging stakeholders, addressing resistance, and piloting solutions, can drive sustainable change in a challenging environment.

Case Study Discussion Questions

1. What key adaptive leadership strategies did Reverend Addo use to address the challenges at the Birth and Death Registry?
2. How did stakeholder engagement contribute to the success of the transformation?
3. Why was the decision to pilot the digital system in selected regions critical to the project's success?
4. Discuss how addressing resistance among staff and citizens was integral to achieving results.
5. How can other government agencies in Ghana replicate the successes of this initiative?
6. In what ways did the grassroots approach (town halls, personal storytelling) impact the transformation process?
7. What are the risks of failing to engage stakeholders in adaptive leadership projects?