

# Gauguin's Questions

Human resources renewal at DFAIT means looking for some fundamental answers. By Michael Small

**ON** the second floor of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts hangs the greatest canvas Paul Gauguin ever painted: a vast, mythic tapestry of Tahitian life entitled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

I often think we should hang a reproduction of that painting at the entrance to the Human Resources Branch. People frequently come to see us with existential questions like those in the back of their minds. Unfortunately, we can't paint like Gauguin or offer symbolic answers to people's very concrete problems. Such is the gap in expectations between what we are and what people hope we might be. Nevertheless, we can offer some insights into where we have come from as an organization and where we need to go.

Let me outline three challenges I posed to the branch when I arrived as its new ADM about six months ago: first, to improve client service; second, to make the Branch better-connected to the rest of the department; and third, to make a visible and substantial contribution to DFAIT's Transformation Agenda.

To use the language of performance management, the first two are "ongoing commitments"—things we should be in the business of continuously trying to improve—while the third is a "key commitment."

Let me focus here on the first point, client service.

It is hard to improve client service if you don't know what your clients think of it. We identified directors at Headquarters as our first key client group and conducted a baseline survey of their perceptions. We received a remarkable response rate: 66 percent of the almost 200 directors sent us their views.

They told us we did a poor job providing consistent advice. Almost as bad was our slowness in responding to questions. The least useful source of HR information was our site on the intranet. The acute lack of rotational administrative assistants



Fundamental questions: Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

was frustrating. Finally, directors did not have enough information on trends and understanding of HR policies to effectively mentor, or provide career counselling to, younger colleagues.

Based on this feedback, we have taken a series of actions. We have reorganized our HR advisors on a "single point of service" model, begun overhauling our intranet site and launched a renewal initiative for the rotational administrative assistant stream. A new group of mentors will shortly be partnered with new "mentees."

Will any of this make a difference in terms of client satisfaction? We hope so. More importantly, we intend to find out. Our commitment is to conduct the same survey again by March 2009, to determine whether these initiatives—and many others underway—have made a measurable impact in improving the quality of the service we provide.

*Michael Small is Assistant Deputy Minister of Human Resources. This article is excerpted from a new blog, "Inside HR," on the DFAIT intranet.*



New university graduates considering jobs at DFAIT were issued red passports promising "A Career Without Borders" as part of the fall post-secondary recruitment campaign. The promotional brochures—profiling the different types of jobs and career paths at DFAIT—as well as other creative materials were used in events across the country. There is also a new career Web page. Recruitment is a key element of the department's renewal and transformation effort.