

CASE STUDY

Team of Teams Offers Business-Unit-Wide Approach to Adaptive Management

Washington Business Unit Commits to a Different Implementation Approach with Adaptive Teams

Across The Nature Conservancy, conservation teams are balancing priorities across multiple strategies. This holds true for the teams in Washington, who recognized that major conservation challenges — declining salmon populations, threatened old-growth forests, and inequitable impacts of climate change — demand a new approach. With multiple conservation strategies at play and a key goal of ensuring team well-being, the Washington team is taking an adaptive approach to the work that breaks teams out of silos to work together on the underlying strategies to ultimately achieve long-term conservation goals.

The Washington Business Unit recently developed a strategic framework oriented toward the TNC 2030 Western Division Priorities and Washington’s cross-cutting strategic priorities. Washington Director of Strategy and Innovation Kathy Pierson shares that the business unit completed a robust strategic framework process in the summer of 2023. The process produced five strategies for the Washington team to focus on until 2030 and beyond. The business unit sought a novel, more effective approach to take action on this framework.

TEAM:

Washington Business Unit

PROJECT:

Five distinct strategies

AGILITY LAB OFFERING:

Unit-Wide Adaptive Teams

“Moving from planning and into implementation, there was a strong desire to break down historical silos and work more collaboratively toward shared goals,” Pierson says. “However, in our new hybrid work reality, we often observed that the solution to collaboration was lots of extra meetings for everyone as they tried to stay engaged and up to speed on what was happening across the chapter, the division, and the organization.”

Pierson shares that the Business Unit was still doing too much and not effectively saying “no” or “not now” to work. This was causing burnout and overworked staff, Zoom fatigue, and a decrease in overall well-being. This environment was also not effectively solving the Business Unit’s collaboration needs.

“We needed a new way of working that could bring relief to our staff by providing ways to stay engaged and connected to the work without feeling completely overwhelmed by the information and time needed to do so,” Pierson says. “And we needed ways to make evidence-based prioritization decisions about our work, stay focused on fewer things, and allow us to clearly make progress toward our goals.” This recognition led the Washington Business Unit to partner with the Agility Lab in September 2023.

Setting the Stage: Adopting Team of Teams in Washington

The Washington Business Unit includes five Conservation Strategy teams and multiple layers of conservation leadership. At the end of 2023, Agility Lab team members had more than 50 conversations with Washington team members to learn more about their hopes and concerns regarding their work as they shift out of strategic planning and into implementation.

Agility Lab Program Director Molly Ganley says that the concerns shared by the Washington Business Unit — including siloed work and prioritization struggles — are not unique. These challenges are compounded when a team has multiple pieces of work in motion and team members split time between projects, which makes focus and progress more difficult. The decision to pause and make a change in how the work gets done is a significant and critical first step.

“I heard someone say once that ambiguity is a prerequisite for leadership,” Ganley says. “For teams that want to shift into a more transparent, adaptive, resilient approach to the work — supporting those intentions with the right tools is a really important step.”



ADAPTIVE TEAMS

Adaptive Teams is an implementation approach we offer conservation teams navigating high degrees of uncertainty. It consists of foundational workshops, a series of recurring meeting formats, information management tools, and ongoing coaching by a specialized Agility Lab Adaptive Teams coach.

[VIEW PRICING & DETAILS →](#)



“How might we enable teams to learn and adapt as they go so they're making more of an impact and feeling better about their work?”

— MOLLY GANLEY, THE AGILITY LAB PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Throughout 2024, the Washington Business Unit will work with a new implementation approach: Team of Teams. This strategy builds upon the Adaptive Teams framework, designed to support each team transitioning to adaptively manage their priorities. With Team of Teams, the entire Business Unit will move to an Adaptive Teams strategy to improve collaboration and promote learning and adapting throughout the Business Unit.

As the Business Unit begins its rollout of Team of Teams, the Agility Lab is sharing the enabling conditions that led to this game-changing management decision and intends to share how the work has been going later this year in a follow-up article.

A 12-Month Roadmap to Reflect, Adapt, and Achieve Impact

In response to the needs and goals shared by the Washington Business Unit, The Agility Lab proposed a 12-month Team of Teams “roadmap,” which includes quarterly strategy and leadership themes to enable the Business Unit-wide transformation. Agility Lab is supporting the process, including team coaching, facilitated workshops, check-ins, and reviews.

Adopting Team of Teams includes Agility Lab-designed meeting formats, workshop formats, and guidance for teams to learn and adapt as they go and be as productive and efficient as possible while increasing their well-being. The adaptive tools and resources are organized around three themes — connect and grow, learn and adapt, prioritize and flow — and a set of 10 practices (see sidebar).

The 11 Practices of Adaptive Teams

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Prioritize impact | 4. Learn by doing | 8. Celebrate progress |
| 2. Build trusting relationships | 5. Reflect and adapt | 9. Strive for equity |
| 3. Start small to de-risk quickly | 6. Make evidence-based decisions | 10. Say no |
| | 7. Co-create with humble curiosity | 11. Work in whole, durable teams |

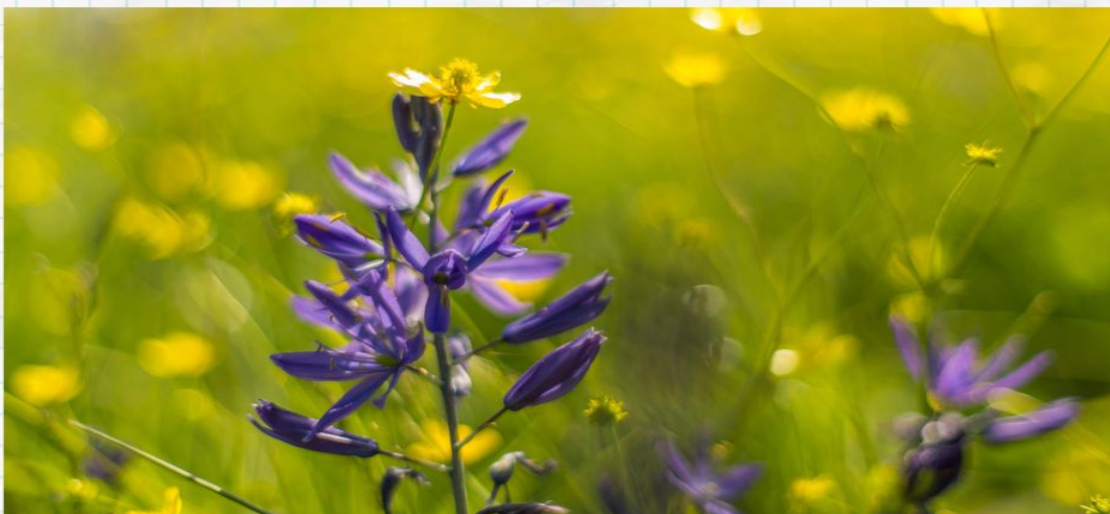
The Agility Lab's goal is to support the Washington teams in adopting a cohesive implementation approach that works for their structure of multiple teams and leaders. The approach will also give the teams the time and tools necessary to communicate and collaborate on the complex, interrelated work being done across the state.

Ganley says: "We are asking: What does it look like for each of those teams to have the tools they need to have a different kind of conversation about making progress on the most important work? To focus as deeply as they can and collaborate efficiently and effectively? That then enables a more grounded, holistic conversation about all the conservation work happening in Washington."

One of the key Team of Teams practices is ensuring that discussions about priorities occur regularly and together, so the Business Unit can accelerate progress on the longer-term 2030 goals. While each strategy team has its own goals and makes progress on its own, they also come together on a regular basis to share what they're achieving, what they're learning, and what strategy adjustments they would recommend. These meetings provide a cohesive, transparent, and regular rhythm for a conversation about the most essential work for the Business Unit to focus on next.

"I sometimes think of it as modeling responsible uncertainty — being able to communicate about things that we do not know and taking action to learn more about them in relatively quick ways," Ganley says. "That is something that, on its own, can be transformative for teams."

As the Washington teams get into a rhythm, despite perhaps holding more frequent strategy sessions, they are aiming to spend less total time in meetings. The regular prioritization conversations allow for strategy adjustments that will enable the team to make a more profound impact more quickly, in contrast to spending large blocks of time in a conference room at the beginning of a project and arriving at a fixed strategy. The Washington teams will test assumptions and evaluate progress frequently, and do less or more of certain strategies depending on the results — steering the unit toward the 2030 goals.



“Through an Adaptive Teams approach, the entire Business Unit can make those important prioritization decisions together in a way that creates clear feedback loops between conservation leadership and the conservation strategy implementation teams, building shared awareness of the bigger picture and each person’s place in it,” Ganley says. “Working toward shared goals is a big part of the Adaptive Teams work.”

Looking Forward: Goals for 2024

Agility Lab Program Director Emma Ruffin Kuhn says The Agility Lab and Washington will be working together to build a rhythm for the Washington Business Unit that allows each team to learn as they go, regularly incorporate new evidence to inform prioritization decisions, and continually strengthen trust and respect within and beyond the Business Unit.

“We intend to create greater resilience, adaptability, transparency, and conservation impact as a result of our work together,” Ruffin Kuhn says.

Pierson says they are deep into the work of bringing the Adaptive Team of Teams approach to the full Washington Business Unit. Each of the Business Unit’s five strategy teams has been matched with an Agility Lab coach who works closely with the strategy leads and the strategy team to learn and implement the Adaptive Teams principles and processes.

Currently, the Business Unit is focused on the conservation strategy and leadership teams, and in the near future will provide more support to other functional teams, such as science, government relations, marketing, philanthropy, and operations. The Washington teams have also been working closely with Agility Lab to provide support to their conservation leadership structures, with the goal of clarifying decision-making roles and responsibilities between the executive team, the newly restructured conservation leadership team, and the strategy leads and strategy teams.

“The hope is to be able to clearly articulate the scope of authority and governance for each of these teams so that decisions can move more quickly and strategy teams encounter fewer barriers to their work,” Pierson says.

Pierson says the goal is for the Washington Business Unit, particularly its strategy teams, to be self-sufficient in implementing Adaptive Teams principles and processes by the end of 2024, and for them to want to continue working in this way. She says they also have a goal of sharing learnings and scaling this way of working to other Business Units, Divisions, and beyond.

“The goal is to bring relief and fulfillment to our teams by providing processes, practices, cadence, and mindset shifts that help clear the way for greater conservation impact,” Pierson says.



Let’s collaborate.

Take two minutes to let us know about your project and we’ll be in touch to explore how we might work together.

[LEARN MORE & CONTACT US →](#)