

From subject matter experts to business leaders | A leadership perspective

A team is on a journey - a journey that was started by one VP and will continue to evolve for years to come. In this piece, we take a look at some of the defining moments on the journey in the last 3 years which turned this organisation into the rebranded and larger organisation it is today.

Introduction

When this leader was appointed to the role of VP EMEA for one of the major organisations in the business he felt he was going in as an outsider. Not only was he from a sales background, he was also an American who had hardly set foot in Europe! In addition, a number of the team had also applied for the role, the recruitment process had not been handled well and expectations were mixed.

Stepping into the shoes of the outgoing VP was going to be tough. This leader was somewhat of a living legend in the company, having built this organisation from the bottom up and created a new culture in the team following a large merger. In the new VP's words, he felt he had *"been given the keys to the Lexus"* (which he later worked out through his cultural awareness was more like a Bentley!)

For this leader this was a "BIG JOB" which posed the question; *"Can I apply my style of leadership to 450 people?"* Feedback from both his wife and previous colleagues reassured him that *"You care about your people, you defend your people, and we would follow you – that's what you're going in with."*

Guiding principles

To survive the early weeks, this leader stood by two guiding principles:

1. To be respectful of the outgoing leader and what he had achieved; and 2. To be respectful of the different cultures, geographical or otherwise, that he might encounter along the way.

The team had been working through a Cultural Journey, facilitated by Excellence In Leadership, to agree their desired culture, their values and how they were going to lead the organisation. This process had been highly consultative and participative, had involved everyone and started to impact the way in which the team led and behaved as a group. They were used to sharing their thinking, checking-in with the wider organisation and encouraging feedback.

The new VP's ambition was to create an environment where people trusted him, felt they could be open and would speak up when they needed to. He wanted people to be vocal and have opinions. He wanted people to feel better when they left his office than when they came in. He wanted to be a life-giver not a life-taker.

Individual challenges

In the first few weeks he met with key people across EMEA to understand what were the biggest challenges for the team; why they were facing those challenges; what the best opportunities for growth were; what they would do if they were in his shoes and what they wanted from their leader.

This process alone was a steep learning curve. Being a loud American, this leader felt he had to tone down his personality to fit in with the different cultures and felt he was constantly apologising for being slightly inappropriate. He hoped his sincerity and honesty in sharing that he just didn't know any better and was doing his best would help him through.

Three clear priorities for the organisation emerged from his early discussions with the team:

1. To become more business focused, blending commercial and technical expertise
2. To create greater alignment and become an indispensable weapon for the business
3. To drive productivity and do more with less

Particularly on the continent, the team wanted a leader they could see, someone who would lead from the front and get in amongst the people.

The upcoming conference, a large offsite, was a real highlight for the new VP. It was the first time he had got his team of 450 people together as a family and the first time he had run anything of this size as his own show. His opening speech set the scene, but he felt he hadn't been himself so for his closing speech he *"let it rip and got in amongst his gang!"* It felt right.

450:1 leader ratio

Within 6-9 months the role was snowballing as this VP was trying to maintain a 450:1 relationship with his team and manage a demanding boss. He wanted anyone to be able to access him, get into his diary and get stuff off his or her chest, but this quickly became unmanageable.

This VP recognised he wasn't performing at his best and realised that he needed to funnel his leadership through his direct reports.

With the help of Mandy Flint of Excellence In Leadership, the VP undertook a 360 assessment to help him understand where he was at and what needed to change for him to move forward successfully. In his words, *"this was no ordinary 360"*. This gave him real data, actual quotes and anonymous comments that were more meaningful and powerful than any other 360 he'd done before.

Although there was lots of good feedback, the critical messages were that he was failing to delegate effectively, wasn't saying no and wasn't following through.

The turning point for this leader came at a Manager's Meeting in Germany, where he shared the first one page One Page Plan with his direct reports. The One Page Plan was how they were going to focus the business on delivering the 3 key priorities for the organisation. But he was disappointed with their reaction. They were not vocal, didn't have strong opinions and obviously didn't get it! After hauling them up to the screen and drilling them on it for an hour, he was getting nowhere.

Leader further ahead

That's when this VP realised just how far ahead of his team he was and that he had to let them catch up. Through an externally facilitated process, he enabled them to debate, challenge, understand and agree the elements of the plan and how each item was to be measured. A day later they were all right there with him – what a difference it made. Now they were moving forward as a cohesive team. They were all engaged and felt more ownership and accountability of the plan.

The VP also spent time with the team to tell them *"Who I am as a person."* He wanted to be open and honest with them about what made him tick, how to get the best out of him and what brought out the worst in him. It helped the team to understand him and how he worked and explained some of the frustrations they felt.

At the end of the session, he recalls a pivotal moment for him, where one influential participant turned to him and said, *"You're one of us now. We know you are an American. Stop apologising for it, it's OK!"*

The next challenge was the meeting in the USA with the whole of his organisation. Previously it had been easier to *"pick people up and bring them with you"* but based on his experience with the Managers in Germany this certainly wasn't going to work with 450 people, let alone 450 people who were used to being involved and consulted during change.

Lasting transformational change

The US conference was a huge success. Whilst other people were sitting in presentations, this team's conference room was buzzing with activity, discussion and flip charts! The team gathered feedback on the One Page Plan from all 450 people and incorporated it into a new version with a page of notes to explain what it all meant. Everyone owned this document and had truly bought into it and had been given an opportunity to shape it. So they all were committed to making it happen. This is where this leader realised - this is how you create lasting transformational change - not just change!

Initially the measurements on the One Page Plan were all red, but the trends were good, and he was confident that with the support of the team the metrics traffic lights would all be green by the end of the year.

Managing brand

But the One Page Plan was just the start of focusing the team on the business context. This VP had purposefully worn a shirt and tie to work everyday since he started. Why? Because he wanted to be seen as a leader. Part of developing the team from subject matter experts to business people was about how they were seen by others, getting them out from behind their desks and involved with the world around them. The team wanted to build a sense of identity that would send a message to those outside the organisation that they were more than just experts. Everyone started to wear shirts and ties consistently, even those who you never thought would. They were really becoming aligned with commercial sales business partners at a much deeper level.

The team also started to manage their brand externally by getting involved in public speaking opportunities, making presentations at conferences and even getting onto CNN. They were so successful at their own PR that the marketing department felt at times as if they were out of a job!

Emotionally engaging

Through the team's own experience of working in this very engaging way, by including people and getting them involved, the team became very aware of the need to engage people at an emotional level to create real buy-in, ownership and accountability. They found this worked for them within their own teams and with commercial teams they were working with and other internal partners as well as customers. This emotionally engaging way of working allowed the team to create an environment where people would connect with them readily and really helped them to achieve results.

This VP had also experienced real high performance coaching himself and had taken what he had learnt from being coached and then modelled it into his own ways of working with the leaders who reported to him and they had all become better leaders and good coaches themselves. He led this type of personal development culture – he was a real exemplar of leadership.

There was no magic moment when it all changed, it was just a journey that evolved and now *"it's how we roll."*

Technically excellent but internally focused

Three years ago the team described their organisation as technically excellent but internally focused, as having a strong culture but reactive and not aligned to other teams.

Today this organisation is described as commercially and technically excellent, creative and proactive and 100% aligned.

The One Page Plan is now how the business is run. It is reviewed quarterly and feedback and improvements are always being sought. Items that are constantly green are removed and new measures introduced.

The team have reduced headcount by 11% and increased span of control by 20%. They have added six new technologies to manage, raised productivity and achieved the highest retention rate across the business at 97%.

It is now a business that when people leave on good terms the door is always open to welcome them back and all new hires meet the VP.

The team pioneered business practices that have now been rolled out globally, such as a competencies skills matrix to evaluate performance and potential across the team.

Everyone has grown, both as people and as leaders. They had the best development years of their careers and this VP gave the best performance reviews they had ever received.

As for this VP, his leaders are closely connected to commercial leaders and are busy driving strategy at the highest level across the regions. They are also working with Quality teams to identify cost savings and coaching and developing others across the company.

So as this VP prepares for his presidential handover to the next generation he has a few lessons of his own to share:

1. You have what you need

Limit how many leadership books you read - read them at an IQ and EQ level. Work out how to apply what you have read to your own situation using your emotional intelligence. Get to know yourself, build your own self-awareness and make the connections

2. Surround yourself with people who complement you

Seek out people who do well at those things you don't. Ensure you have people who complement your style and who will make things happen

3. Ask yourself if you are good or just lucky?

Good leaders know how to repeat what they have achieved; lucky leaders do it and move on none the wiser

4. Have patience and trust the process

Bringing others with you and creating a powerful team takes time and dedication. Find a good coach and facilitator that you trust and be patient. Taking shortcuts won't deliver you the best results in the end and never facilitate your own meetings!

5. The job of a leader is to attend to the small things that make a big difference

Touch everyone in some way. Take the time to meet with all new hires and build self-esteem in those around you

6. Be aware of your executive presence

Your words and actions are magnified because of the position you hold and your behaviour speaks volumes. If there's one thing I've learnt, it's to manage my highs and lows and remember who's watching me!

Looking back, this leader remembers saying to one of his direct reports, "*You've had 2 weeks, now get on the boat!*" and reflects that perhaps he could have been more thoughtful about how people handle change and the best way to bring people with you!

Going into the future, his advice is, "*make it better, shake it up, continue to evolve and trust the process!*"