

DEVELOPING AN HR TEAM FIT TO LEAD IN A RAPIDLY GROWING BUSINESS

This story is one of great success coupled with rapid growth. As an international airline carrier, the company has seen fast expansion since its establishment due to the demand for low-cost air travel by the consumer.

In 2010, the business appointed a new Chief Executive Officer, furthering the expansion of the company; with record profits announced in 2012, and in 2013 entering the FTSE 100 for the first time.

We talked to Alita Benson, formerly Group People Director for the airline, about the need to transform her own team of HR leaders into the operational leadership the company required during this growth.

AS PART OF THE NEWLY FORMED EXECUTIVE TEAM, YOU MUST HAVE FACED SOME VERY TOUGH BUSINESS ISSUES?

When I joined the organisation in February 2011, there were wide operational challenges within the business. Performance was not where it needed to be and staff engagement and morale were not high. Although we had brought in a new leadership team, there was a historical lack of trust in the top leadership of the business, and a culture of 'keep your head down and make sure you operate under the radar'.

There were a lot of processes still reminiscent of when the business was smaller, more than 10 years previously. These were no longer appropriate for a company that was getting a lot bigger, with a European outlook. The organisation

"The organisation really needed to grow up. Leadership was not high on the agenda at the time".



really needed to grow up and at this point in time, many of the leaders within the functions across the organisation were not as engaged as they should be. As such, leadership and management training were critical yet had not been high up on the priorities for the business.

‘It was a very fast growing company and there was a need for things to be ‘now’. This adds a cultural element when you are dealing with leadership and the style of consultant that you bring in to help’.

YOU CHOSE RELUME TO HELP YOU TO BUILD YOUR HR LEADERSHIP TEAM. WHY DID YOU SELECT THEM?

I engaged Relume to help me with pulling together my direct reports into an effective HR Leadership Team. I had eight direct reports in total, and I needed them to work together, to plan together and for us all to move ahead as one cohesive team.

I already knew some of the Relume team and I knew exactly what I would get from them in terms of tools and their process. I also absolutely trusted them to come in and run a session in what to me, was a very important environment. I also liked the fact that the interventions were co-created between myself and Relume – so they made sure that I would get the outcomes that I desired through their in-depth understanding of the way I wanted to work, and what I wanted everyone to get out of it.

“I rate Relume very highly, but they are not for everyone and some cultures are just not right for them. Relume are in it for the long-game and sometimes businesses want short-term results instead”.



CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE INTERVENTIONS THAT YOU BUILT WITH RELUME TO ASSIST YOU IN MEETING YOUR GOALS?

I think that the key challenge was how we were going to get people to where I wanted them to be, in a cultural environment in which they were just not used to having gritty, real, honest conversations.

Some members of the team were very sceptical about involving Relume, and even about having a workshop off-site, since this was so alien to their way of working. However, through energetic and creative interventions, Relume earned their trust and changed their minds.

Relume helped me with running off-site sessions with my team over a period of two years. The agreement that I had made prior to the sessions was that I would not make my team do anything that I was not prepared to do first do myself. So when we used innovative tools like 'The Goldfish Bowl', where one person took to 'the stage' and could be questioned by all other team members enabling sharing and honest feedback to be generated, I did this first.

These off-sites were so powerful and successful that as time went on, we started to use them for our strategy development sessions, for developing a departmental brand and for planning how to instill the necessary cultural change in our department in general.

“My experience was very positive with Relume – they take you on quite a challenging journey but in a very supportive and caring way”.

WERE THERE ANY MOMENTS ALONG THE WAY WHERE YOU THOUGHT ‘THIS IS REALLY WORKING!’

When we first started our off-site workshops with Relume, we would go round the table and ask 'how is everyone' and typically everyone would reply 'fine thanks'.

So Relume helped to create a safe, honest, constructive and fun environment and this helped people to share information. They really got to know the individuals and recognise their needs within the team; then used this to help get the best out of everyone during team conversations



So as we shared more and built up trust between each other, as time went on, people started to use the sessions to discuss personal difficult situations.

I remember, one day, someone who never shared decided to join the conversation. This was a real moment of change; I believe they had realised the value of sharing in the team environment. This is not something that they would naturally have done without the intervention of our Relume sessions.

AS A RESULT OF THE INTERVENTIONS DESIGNED BY RELUME, DID YOU GET THE RESULTS THAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR?

In terms of outcomes, it is difficult to measure specifics, however, yes, I would say that I did get the results I was looking for in terms of the change in culture, leadership and engagement of my direct team and the function at large.

In fact, the business ran an exercise internally to look at the dynamics of all its functional leadership teams and I was very proud when my HR leadership team scored the highest inter-team trust out of all the teams. I absolutely believe that a lot of this was down to the early foundational work that we did with Relume.

Also, due to their facilitation of our off-sites, we were able to co-create our strategic plan as a leadership team, and therefore everyone felt a great sense of ownership to that plan. This whole intervention enabled my team to pull together at a time when, due to personal circumstances, I was not able to devote the leadership to my team I would have done normally. Again, without creating those early foundations with Relume, I do not think that my team would have pulled together so well.

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