

CREATING CALM IN A FINANCIAL STORM

Leading up to the financial crisis in 2008, this FTSE 100 financial services organisation was a successful business. However, like many of its counterparts, when the recession hit, cracks began to show, and the business hit a stumbling block.

We met with a former Executive Committee member to hear how executive coaching changed his perspective, his leadership and set him and his team on a journey of transformation.

HOW DID THE INTRODUCTION TO RELUME COME ABOUT?

I was brought into the organisation to help turn the situation around. Which I did, however, as time passed, we realised there were still cracks in the team that I inherited. Across the business, relationships were fractious, and conditions were tough. The paper was starting to come off and it wasn't a fun time. However, that's when you find out who's good and who's not. I learnt more about my team in six months of challenging conditions than I had in the previous two years of working with them. I realised that I needed some help to try and deal with this and bring the relationships back to positive, effective ones. We spoke with a couple of coaching firms and when we met Khurshed, we knew that Relume was who we needed to work with.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT RELUME THAT MADE YOU HIRE THEM?

It was the calmness. They see things very clearly and don't try to overload you with ideas; instead building them up gradually. And this is what we needed. We needed calmness because people were running around like headless chickens. There was no bullshit either. They can quickly comprehend a situation, distil it into the raw issues and tell it how it is. If it's not going to get fixed, then Khurshed will tell you it won't get fixed. If he doesn't think you're on-board then he won't work with you. They are effectively counsellors but in a corporate guise.

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HOW DID THEY SUPPORT YOU AND YOUR TEAM?

At the outset, they spent a lot of time working with me. I'd never had an executive coach before and found it to be incredibly personal. We worked together to really think about who I was and how I interacted with other people. We also looked at some of my more difficult relationships to explore the issues and try to improve them step-by-step.

Relume also worked with my management team, taking them off-site for a few days. These days were full of tricky conversations, but that is where Relume are at their most skillful. They will sit, listen and shape conversations to get the nasty stuff out on the table. They can take the heat out of the situation and get to the nub of the matter before piecing things together and help us put a plan of action together to help us get back on track as a team. Those conversations were private, of course; everybody felt comfortable saying what they wanted to say and none of it came back to me. But what he would do is give me pointers as to how I could better support members of my team with their development and how I could do better as a leader.

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For us, there were too many different personalities, so it was never going to hum perfectly. However, we did get to a situation where we had a clear sense of shared purpose, objectives and an approach to get there. It took a while, but we got to a good place. We could have honest conversations with each other, we were open and vulnerable. This wouldn't have happened without Relume.

YOU ALSO ATTENDED A CHALLENGER WEEK, TELL ME ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE...

It was quite amazing. It was an eclectic mix of people and everybody there implicitly trusted Relume. It meant we all had a connection, and all trusted each other. There was no baggage, just an immediate sense of community.

Over the course of the week Relume facilitated deep conversations which allowed you to really look at yourself in the mirror and be completely open and honest with those in the room. I was exhausted by the end of it. But it's one of those things you look back on say 'wow, that was amazing'. It's hard to describe in a conversation. It's an environment I won't encounter again.



THIS MUST'VE ENDED UP BEING A VERY TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY FOR YOU...

It was. Despite working in the industry for 30 odd years, I'd never had any help. I'd been leading big teams of senior people and this was the first time I'd ever had access to a coach. I was very open to learning about myself, how people perceived me and how, by channeling that, I could get the best out of other people.

I was able to develop skills to better work with people. I addressed some of my perceived weaknesses in my personality and character. There was a lot of self-reflection, a lot of talking to people, a lot of opening yourself up and just feeling good for doing that. For the first time, I had a clear script about how I was going to operate in a different way. How I was going to be different. I realised I needed to slow down and be calmer.

HOW DID THIS IMPACT UPON YOUR WORK?

People were commenting on how different I was. Up until then, people just looked at me and said what next. There was always the sense of having to create and everybody else tag along. After a while I felt I couldn't afford to be wrong. But, through coaching, I realised there is always a time when it was appropriate to say, 'you know what, I'm not perfect'. That it's ok to show a bit of vulnerability and put yourself out there. You've got to be brave, recognising you have the technical competency and experience, so you can afford to give a little bit more of yourself to get a lot more back.

And people really appreciated it. When I was more honest, when I held my hands up and showed more of myself. Some people who liked my big energy, action-oriented approach thought I was ill because everything became a lot more relaxed and calmer! For those who hadn't got on with the full-on intensity, our relationships got easier.

What that kicked off, not just in my team but across the whole business, was a learning that mistakes are not to be bashed over the head, but they can be

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used as an experience. If you meet someone from the organisation now and asked them what the culture is like most people will say we have a learning culture, that we value learning and progression. And that we view mistakes as opportunities to learn more. That's a huge shift in culture.

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SO, WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

While my relationships with my team got better, and the dynamic improved, the problem for me didn't go away completely. Khurshed and I had several conversations around how I wasn't learning anything, that I felt I'd lost my sense of purpose and just how frustrated I was. And Khurshed kept saying to me "if you're waiting for something to change, to give yourself more purpose in this organisation, then forget it". He said this a few times and eventually something clicked, and I made the decision to step away from it.

The final thing Khurshed did for me was prepare me to leave positively. By this point, I'd worked there for several years, I'd done some great things, the firm was in good shape. And he helped me get into a place where I could walk away happy, I'd processed it all and settled it with myself before I wrote that resignation letter.

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FINALLY, HOW WOULD YOU SUM UP YOUR EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH RELUME?

Invaluable. I mean, life-changing for me. My journey with Relume has given me all the tools so I can say I genuinely understand who I am and how to manage and lead teams of people. These conversations woke something inside of me. Helped me find out what's important and how I can use my skills to get there. It was incredibly valuable, not just for me but for the team and the business too.