

MOVING FROM OPERATIONAL TO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN THE EXECUTIVE TEAM

Unum is one of the UK's leading financial protection insurers; selling income protection, critical illness cover and life insurance.

It was formed over 40 years ago in the UK, over which time a number of practices and processes had built up organically. UK CEO, Peter O'Donnell felt these needed to be modernised for the company to sustain competitive advantage in the 21st Century.

We caught up with Peter to find out why leadership development was at the heart of this business transformation and to find out how Relume helped to strengthen leadership ability and practices throughout the organisation.

“I wanted the leadership team to take ownership for the running of the business so that the Executive Team could take a more strategic role, plus more coaching and developing of their staff”.



YOU TOLD US THAT YOUR ORGANISATION WAS A TRADITIONAL INSURER THAT NEEDED TO TRANSFORM ITSELF WITH MORE MODERN APPROACHES. WHAT DID THIS MEAN IN TERMS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

As part of our business analysis, we carried out an internal diagnosis of the Unum Executive Team. From this it was clear that the team was spending far too much time running the business, and focused on operational activities, and not doing the strategic work which was critical for the business to move forward.

There were also some very specific issues with the leadership throughout the business:

1. We did not have the quality of leadership below the Executive Team to really take ownership for running the business
2. The Executive Team simply did not have the time to devote to coaching and development of their staff; where we needed them to learn new leadership styles and adopt modern practices
3. There was a heavy parent - child relationship between the leadership and staff probably a throwback to the traditional business model that we were operating to at the time.
4. There was a lack of confidence in the Executive Team to deliver.
5. There were poor relationships across the organisation due to people working in their silos.

“We had a very siloed organisation, where people ran their own functions. The analogy which comes to mind to describe the culture was ‘if there is a broken window that is not in your area – then you should leave it broken’.

“Most important (in using Relume) is the quality of people that they have got. In the end – you are buying people and the people that I have worked with in Relume are some of the best, if not THE best that I have worked with in this space”.



YOU CHOSE TO BRING IN RELUME TO HELP YOU – WHY DID YOU SELECT THEM?

I have worked with a number of leadership development consultancies in the past, but I decided that Relume were the right partner for this because their approach was very much in-line with the culture I wanted to develop. I also have a huge amount of confidence in their intellectual and emotional capabilities and the quality of their people. I knew they had a lot of very good tools and processes that they could use to develop our staff.

They are extremely good at listening and reading what is going on while they are working with their clients. They continually adapt their approach to optimise the result that they will achieve through their interventions.

“At the first event, Relume made us all stand in a line and asked people to position themselves in terms of their working proximity to the Executive Team. The result was the Executive Team on one side of the room and everyone else on the other side”.

HOW DID RELUME HELP YOU TO FORM AN EFFECTIVE OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM?

When Relume started their engagement, the organisation was around 900 staff in size. The number of leaders totalled 200. The top operational leaders were those reporting directly to the Executive Team, comprising 50 individuals and initially we focused on the Executive Team and the top 50. They helped us deliver a number of interventions which really transformed our leadership approach:

“By the end of the last workshop, we did the same exercise and it was difficult to work out who was on the leadership team and who was on the Executive Team. Their perceptions of what their role and responsibility was had completely changed”.



LEADERSHIP CONFERENCES

Every six months during a two-year period, Relume supported a conference-style event and workshops for the executive team and our top operational leaders. This was an opportunity for them to learn and discuss new leadership tools and reflect on activities that they had been working on. To start with, attendees were skeptical of the value and they just went along to see what was happening. By the end of this time period, things had really progressed; people were much more open and could see the value of applying the learning.

EDUCATION AND COACHING SESSIONS

In conjunction with the conferences, Relume ran smaller coaching and education sessions for subsets of the top 50. They worked through a set of basic models of how the workplace had changed in terms of what the expectations of leadership were and what they are now. One powerful initial exercise was to get attendees to reflect on leadership practices when they first started work and how these had changed to current day leadership expectations. This helped really bring to life what is required to lead in the world today.

Another successful activity was coaching sessions by telephone. Relume would facilitate conversations and learning where all leaders could ring in, listen and talk about the things that they were trying to change, and how they were using their newly acquired tools to make that change happen.

This required very artful facilitation and I was surprised how effective it was to get people thinking about things differently and to enable discussions that removed the emotion and confrontation that had been present before the intervention.

“People that engaged with Relume interventions are much more impactful in the organisation now. There are a number of people who have been promoted and moved into the high potential group due to the experience they gained in working on new developments”.

ACTION LEARNING

The most recent interventions that Relume has helped us to introduce are Action Learning Groups. This is where the operational leaders workgroups on a real business problem, while coached by Relume.

Action Learning has helped the teams make significant impact on improving and modernising our business processes. We have run Action Learning groups focusing on business planning and on our pitch process and drastically improved business processes as a result whilst also identifying the individual and collective learnings from the change approaches.



HOW HAS UNUM BENEFITED FROM THE RELUME INTERVENTIONS?

Our business results have been very successful over the past couple of years and having a stronger business leadership team has impacted directly on those results. We also have tremendous buy-in to our strategy and change plans from leadership and staff.

The Executive Team has stepped away from the operational activities and has been able to become much more strategic. This has meant the next level of leadership really feels that they own the business plan and that they are accountable for delivering it.

We have reduced the top operational leadership team from 50 to 35 and at the same time, people are getting promoted and being rewarded for their potential. This has helped create a more engaged organisation which has confidence in the Executive and leadership teams and believes that we will listen to them and engage with them.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR OTHER ORGANISATIONS THAT ARE GOING THROUGH SIMILAR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE?

Cultural change is challenging and takes time. It's easy to focus more on the immediate business outcomes rather than on the leadership learning. The key to all this was that during their interventions, Relume were able to encourage participants to talk about what they had learned about leadership, and in particular, their own style of leadership whilst we continued to drive improvements and change.

They were also able to ask very direct, but very supportive questions and over time things start to move a lot faster.

We will remember the work that we have done together with Relume for a long time – not just from a work perspective but also in terms of one's own personal development and life skills.

“Relume practices tough love in how they operate. You know that they care about you, but they are not going to let you off the hook”.