MAKING A POSITIVE OUT OF A NEGATIVE

Changing the culture of an organisation is no small feat. It takes a certain amount of bravery just to admit that change is necessary. Having embarked upon the change process it soon becomes obvious that it is a roller coaster ride that cannot easily be stopped. Mike Faulkner discovers the realities of introducing a change of culture

KEY POINTS

- **Achieving entreprise-wide employee buy-in**
- **Changing the way that people think and act**
- **Measurable results from culture change that add to the bottom line**

Ensconced in unassuming offices in the salubrious surroundings of Aberdeenshire County Cricket Club, 42-year-old divisional director for Universal Sodexho, John Blackett, frankly admits that at the outset of the Service Excellence programme no one could have conceived the sheer amount of effort and emotional energy that would be required to make such a transformation across the organisation. Had he known he may have even shied away from it. However once he had started the journey there was no going back, ever. The results being seen now are hugely rewarding from both a personal perspective and the ensuing business results speak for themselves. "It has been like a roller coaster ride, the successes are the highs and the learnings can be the lows. No two days are the same and I wonder sometimes how I can get the rest of my job done, but the payback is great when you get motivational feedback from both staff and customers."

And 'Feedback' is the operative word. Under the Service Excellence programme all employees are challenged to give and accept feedback, be it motivational (positive) or formative (negative). The feedback acts as both a yardstick by which to measure effectiveness and a thought process by which to challenge traditional behaviour patterns. Trying to effect a change of mindset across any established organisation is never easy, but Universal Sodexho presents some unique challenges.

Structure for change

Part of Sodexho Alliance - the French holding company with a $10bn turnover - the company was born from a merger between Kelvin International (a Gardner Merchant subsidiary) and Universal which culminated in a buyout by Sodexho. It now represents $500m turnover, with the Aberdeen operation accounting for around $60m per year. John Blackett is directly responsible for 1200 full time employees, many of whom work on a shift system on off-shore rigs.

Universal Sodexho is a facilities management company that has grown from a basic janitorial supply and service background. Today's offering is diverse and includes catering, retail, health & safety, cleaning and accommodation services. The 1200 customer-facing staff deal daily with the core clients as well as customers. So when the company started losing contracts it was necessary to find out why.

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"When we asked some of our clients why we were losing the business, I was shocked that it had nothing to do with price. When I was told that we had lost business because of the way we treat our people, I knew something needed to be done," explained Blackett. Over a 20-year period the staff and management had simply grown apart.

Service excellence from afar

Unlike a traditional business enterprise where staff, physically, come to a building each morning, here there is little or no necessity for management and staff to meet. Whilst each shift or team has a team leader, and each rig has a facilities manager, it is only the rig manager that has a cause to visit the offices. Therefore, the staff were feeling detached from the company and the company had no rapport with the staff. Couple all of this with working in the harsh environs of the North Sea and a specific set of behavioural patterns emerge. Patterns which have a habit of being destructive and negative.

"When I first heard about the Service Excellence programme, I was a bit sceptical. My own reaction was that I didn't need to be told how to deal with people, after all I am a people person. If that was my reaction, I could only assume that the staff wouldn't embrace it wholesale.

"The process of implementation required a leadership team being in place. This team would end up pretty much driving the initiative. 130 managers took part in the intensive 3-day course and it was during this time that I became a true convert. I could see that embarking on this journey could only be good for all those taking part, both management and employees," stated Blackett.

Sceptics in our midst

Achieving management buy-in was no small task. The company employed to undertake the culture change for Universal Sodexho was Ling Turner. "They had already been tasked by one of our major clients and came highly recommended. They explained the process and how all 1200 members would have to attend a one-day seminar in groups of 18.

"They also pointed out that we could expect the majority of staff to embrace the change, whilst some would adopt a more wait and see mode and at the extreme there could be people who were

highly sceptical that would need more direction and support."

Blackett explains how the seminars went: "At a very early stage we identified the 'sceptics' - at least I thought we had. It came as a complete shock when a hardened 20-year's service man interrupted me during my 'welcome' speech during one seminar aggressively stating... 'I've heard all this before... it'll never work... you're just wasting my time...' were just a couple of the attacking phrases I remember. Imagine my complete astonishment when this same guy - 'a sceptic' - came to me at the dinner in the evening and was suggesting logistical ways to make the programme more accessible to all the staff!"

This degree of success is by no means a one off. The programme developed by Ling Turner is proving to be very successful. Their Service Excellence framework is a unique and holistic approach that achieves transformational change led from the top of organisations. It aligns an organisation's purpose, goals and values with the leadership style to achieve competitive advantage through service.

This is achieved through a relentless focus internally on people, values and behaviour in order to drive excellent service leading to customer retention, loyalty and business success. Their product is unique in that it sustains the initial transformation achieved through workshops at every level in the organisation through the introduction of a robust measurement system.

They have a proven track record spanning medium and large organisations right through to smaller departments striving to become centres of excellence in their own right. Clients value the very thorough and holistic approach which not only achieves the initial mindset shift, but also embeds into place, through the robust behavioural measurement system, the means to sustain that shift for the long term. This measurement system known as 'Customer Focused Assessment' is unique in that it measures service behaviours and attitudes, not just at the front line level, but also at every leadership level.

The Service Excellence programmes vary considerably in terms of scale and structure as it is recognised that organisations are at different stages of their journey towards service excellence. It is therefore difficult to generalise about the mix of consulting, facilitation, training and activities they comprise.

Evaluation

Measuring progress is one thing, but measuring results is quite another. How do you know when you are at the end of your journey, or when service excellence has been achieved?

"I'm not sure that you can ever get to the point where this ends completely. Every member of the Universal Sodexho team are committed to strive for service excellence on a daily basis," according to Blackett.

As a facilities company, Universal Sodexho are responsible for catering on the rigs. As part of the Service Excellence programme they consulted with customers to introduce new dishes. A complaint was received from a 'rigger' stating that they wanted "pie, chips and beans" back on the menu. When it was replaced on the menu, they sold only one portion. The complainer was approached and it transpired that other workers had put him up to it, "just to see if they could get things changed".

This is a typical example of not being able to please all the people all of the time. But the approach to the complainer, according to Blackett, ensured that fewer jokes and pranks are being played. Looking at the bigger picture Service Excellence appears to be working well.

"Some tangible results are starting to come through. We are already seeing a buy-in from our staff, many of whom work 'two weeks on - two weeks off'. In order for them to take part, we

SOME TYPICAL SERVICE EXCELLENCE MEASUREMENT RESULTS

- **Customer satisfaction jumps from 69 percent to 87 percent in 9 months**
- **Staff morale ratings up by 22 percent**
- **Staff morale levels escalate from 39 percent to 87 percent in just 6 months**
- **Clients win new contracts from competitors on the strength of their service excellence promise and delivery**
- **I.T. contractors elect to take salary reduction to attain permanent staff member status with client company**
- **Clients' suppliers sign up for service excellence to retain contracts**
- **Client company retains preferred supplier status and averts the threat of being outsourced**
- **Improved productivity and performance**
- **Alignment of attitudes, values and behaviours**
- **Reduction in organisation boundaries**

(Source: Ling Turner)

Service Excellence is about tough love. It's about really supporting, rewarding and recognising good performance whilst at the same time confronting poor behavioural performance and giving people the support to make the necessary changes

SOME TYPICAL FEEDBACK FROM CUSTOMERS AND STAFF

BEFORE IMPLEMENTING THE SERVICE EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME	AFTER IMPLEMENTING THE SERVICE EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME
'They don't deliver what the customer wants'	'There has been a definite change in their attitude to work and to the customer.'
'There's no ownership when things go wrong'	'A more contented work force. Their objectives are more aligned with those of the platform, our values. They want to please their customers'
'You get service if you're lucky enough to get-the motivated one'	
'I don't trust the company'	'I was happy to stay with the contract last year because I could trust the site manager and all of the higher levels of management. Other companies can promise the earth, but I stayed with Sodexho because I know I'm getting a good service and I trust them.'
'There is still a respect given for strong, bully type behaviour, if you can tear people apart you're good - especially offshore.'	The staff were dissatisfied with their own company, now that has changed.'
'I feel like a number'	'I wondered if I had gone into the wrong office'
'Praise comes but not regularly enough'	'I'm now proud to work for the company forum'
'We are not customer focused'	

Clients value the very thorough and holistic approach which not only achieves the initial mindset shift, but also embeds into place, through the robust behavioural measurement system, the means to sustain that shift for the long term

asked them to come in a day early before going off-shore. We made sure we paid them for the day and sent their partners a some flowers to thank them for their understanding. This was met with warmth from many employees," stated Blackett.

A lot of the feedback received in the past was around not recognising their people, not valuing them. "At Christmas we sent all of our staff a hamper as a personal thank you for the last year. The reaction to this gesture was overwhelming, we have received hundreds of letters, e-mails and calls of thanks, not only from our employees but from their partners, and even our customers".

Passing around the praise

The company has seen the level of formative comments plummet since the Service Excellence programme was embarked upon. One of Universal Sodexho's major clients has already intimated that if service levels are going to stay as high as they are currently, then the contract need not be re-tendered. This is positive proof that service levels are vital to the success of the overall business.

Of the 130 managers who became the leadership team, the vast majority have embraced the process wholeheartedly. According to Blackett, Service Excellence is about tough love. It's about really supporting, rewarding and recognising good performance whilst at the same time confronting poor behavioural performance and giving people the support to make the necessary changes

The Service Excellence philosophy has at its

heart the need to focus on your people, motivating them to deliver outstanding customer service that sets you apart from the competitors.

Blackett says it isn't an easy journey but the effort is worthwhile. The power of the whole team working together is awesome and the results are truly outstanding.

(More information on Service Excellence is available at www.lingturner.co.uk)