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Vodafone NZ writes the book on
Leadership in Action

Along its journey to becoming a values-led organisation, Vodafone found it needed a whole set of new navigational aids for its leaders - so it set about creating them.

You can't talk leadership without explaining culture; you can't explain culture without defining values. Head back down this track and you get some understanding of why and how Vodafone NZ designed the template for its trans-Tasman "leadership in action" (LIA) programme.

It really fell out of the company's decision a few years ago to become a "values based" organisation, explains Vodafone executive Arthur Neely.

This shift accounts for the series of cheery posters adorning office walls with such themes as "intrepid" "hot" or "can-do" - but is no mere window dressing. Values are central to Vodafone's culture.

They not only characterise how the company looks and feels to both its employees and customers but, says Neely, they help define purpose and meaning - what gets you out of bed in the morning.

"It starts with fundamentals because we have this firm belief that people come to work for reasons other than money. You don't get out of bed saying 'today, I'm going to improve shareholder value' That's the result of what we do - but it's not the focus of what we do."

A lot of work went into getting "very explicit" about defining the company's core (non-negotiable) values and its inspirational values. And, somewhere along the way, it became apparent the company's leaders needed to be given some support in their understanding of what it means to be a leader in such an organisation, says Neely.

"so the leadership development initiative is not a standalone - it came out of that background. In hindsight, it looks very logical but in reality we took that first step then found we had to take another. It's very much a journey that we're part way through * "

Because of his own skill sets and interest, Neely was co-opted from operational duties on Vodafone's executive to sponsor what proved to be a very customised leadership programme.

"When we started thinking about what such a course would require and researched what was out there in the market, we couldn't find the right fit so we opted to develop it ourselves with external help, "

Because the programme had a regional, Australia/New Zealand, focus, the course design team (Australia's Rachel Laws, New Zealand's Una Ryan plus Neely) pulled together a trans-Tasman team of providers and were targeting some 400 leader candidates.

The structure they ended up with consists of four core streams run over nine modules each of which involves two to three days of live-in training. The whole programme takes around nine months and the first "graduates" are due to finish this month.

It is largely experiential, non-academic learning, says Neely. "There's a handbook for starters but it's not about being lectured to or homework. It is real face-to-face experiential stuff with facilitators training people to work with each other. The coaching is real-life coaching."

The course is equally divided into four core areas of development.

0 Personal leadership - all about understanding yourself in terms of things like core values, skills , how you impact on others and are perceived by others, and the alignment between your own and the organisation's values;

0 Team leadership - both interpersonal (how you lead and interact with members of your team) and results oriented (how you inspire, motivate, get the best from your team);

* Strategic leadership - first how to develop business strategy, then how to translate that "big picture" vision into a package that's workable at team level in today's context so that each project is seen as a valuable and purposeful piece of the whole jigsaw;

* Coaching and mentoring - one of a leader's most vital roles is helping others fulfil their own best potential.

Building the whole programme up from scratch took longer than originally anticipated, says Neely.

"Una and Rachel both have a background in the design and development of training courses but the process of identifying external providers was quite time consuming. It took a lot of interviewing and talking before we found the right people with the right material and right intent to bring that material into this organisation."

In other words, it all had to fit with Vodafone's values, culture and philosophy - both here and in Australia.

It helps that Vodafone Australia had also gone down the values track and while there are some cultural differences between the two countries, they're not significant, says Neely.

"Once you can focus on enjoying the differences [not seeing them as a bad thing], it gets a lot easier and in terms of this company seeing itself as a regional entity, there are huge benefits.'

That's because, as well as being cross gender and cross status (from managing directors to customer service team leaders), each course has an equal number of Australian and Kiwi participants who live and learn together for some 19 days in all.

"Some of the benefits in terms of creating synergies between the two businesses are just phenomenal. We'll have 200 people on each side of the Tasman who know each other, who speak the same language, share the same leadership skills - if that was the only value we gained out of the course it would be worth it. "

The course also complements Vodafone's global programme which is about identifying and developing the group's future leadership talent. Up to 30 individuals annually are selected across the company's 28 operating companies for special grooming that includes a Henley MBA, offshore secondment and an aggressive career development programme.

Because that captures only a small percentage of people within each operating group (three Kiwis are currently involved), it makes sense to have a local programme with greater reach, says Neely.

While there's a lot of global interest in the local LIA, he doesn't believe the blueprint can be readily transferred.

"I think that even within the Vodafone world, it would be somewhat arrogant to think you could pick it up as a package and pop it into Germany or Italy. That's because the driving force behind it is the value and culture of this organisation.

"The essence of it might work but it would have to be reshaped and repositioned for each of those businesses."

There's also a certain amount of prepping required which is why going through the values exercise first was a useful precursor to LIA, says Neely.

"The business was ready for it and it would have been harder if it hadn't been. It would probably deliver some benefit but maybe not as much * "

So just what benefits has it delivered so far?

There hasn't been any formal measurement as yet but Neely is pretty chuffed by some of the anecdotal and his own subjective appraisal. He recently attended a cross- functional meeting set up to identify which should be core focus areas for the business over the next 12 months.

"We'd done a survey that had come up with 240 which was the wrong answer because it's not possible to focus on that many. So the aim was to get that down to a manageable number we could all agree on."

In previous years, this particular exercise had proved something of a nightmare. This time, it took three hours to whittle core focus areas down to 20 that everyone felt good about.

"Part way through this process, I started realising something different was going on in terms of the way people were interacting - the space they were giving each other to debate, talk, accept differences. And I realised that about 60 percent of the people there were in some part of the LIA programme.

I thought 'wow'- what I'm seeing is a reflection of what they're learning, '

Some of the best feedback has come not from course participants themselves (though they are certainly acknowledging the benefits) but from those they work with who've noticed and are enjoying the changes.

"I get quite a lot of that sort of feed- back and it's probably the most accurate because you're not hearing about what's being learned but how others are experiencing it. "

Observing some of these changes in action, Neely concludes that LIA has gone past the experimental foot-in the-water stage.

"You know that point at which you wonder if this is just a big wank or are we doing something of value here. We've reached that stage where we know we are doing something of real value to the organisation and we're not finished yet."

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