A Partnership Approach to Leading Culture Change

Contact shared this case study about their experience working with Acumen

BACKGROUND

When we began we were concerned about the number of process safety incidents happening globally. Along with a significant increase in asset failures worldwide, awareness of process safety was growing, best practice guidance was emerging, legislative changes were being introduced, and there was a stronger business imperative for organisations to do more. We decided to integrate our process safety, HSE simplification and asset integrity initiatives into a single programme called OSIP (Operational Safety Improvement Programme) with the purpose of getting safety initiatives happening much faster. Having the right measures, systems and procedures in place was one aim, but equally important was having a culture that engaged people and encouraged positive and sustainable change.

CHALLENGE

When we set up OSIP, Contact was already well underway with developing an underlying safety culture that supported people to try new things and to build the capacity to fail safely. We wanted to build on this to create a strong, generative culture around process safety.

One of things we recognised was, that as leaders, many of us continued to see ourselves as guardians of our teams against the business; leading to low engagement, siloed thinking and poor outcomes and behaviours, including reluctance for accountability and an 'us and them' mentality with management. Instead of empowering our people to drive change, many of us were directing it, and failing to bring people along on the journey. In the end, after a series of challenging initiatives, a sense of change fatigue set in.

In launching OSIP we wanted things to be different – improving, sustaining, and in some cases replacing our safety critical processes and systems meant more big changes ahead. We wanted change to happen within, not to people, and for our leaders to support, not direct it.

SOLUTION

We engaged Acumen Global Partners (who specialise in helping businesses build leadership capacity to model and lead change) to run a cultural integration initiative alongside our Operational Safety Improvement Programme.

Rather than committing a plan to paper and sticking to it, they began by talking with our people, reflecting back what they heard and designing a programme that would break down the silos and hierarchies that existed. Their focus was to create collaborative networks focused on problem-solving. Cross-site and functional teams were formed and invited to a monthly forum. Here they were introduced to a range of behavioural tools designed to build their interpersonal skills. They were encouraged to solve problems collaboratively, and supported to become role models of change. In-between forums, they were asked to carry out small, continuous improvement experiments based on the behavioural tools they'd learned and were supported through weekly dial-in calls with Acumen to talk about these experiments, how things were going, and what help they needed.

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RESULTS

The Leadership Culture Programme has been a huge success. We've seen silos dissolve, stronger interpersonal skills develop, conversations improve and much better relationships between sites and Head Office. Leaders around the country are now actively working with each other and their teams to improve their work. We've seen a shift in accountability and greater self-awareness in leaders across the business. There is now a culture where our leaders are pushing boundaries, tackling previous taboos, and challenging long-held opinions, to allow our people to add maximum value to the business. As a result, our people are feeling more included, listened to and willing to try new things.This shift in culture has contributed to a 12% reduction in operating costs, improvements in plant reliability and availability, and increased engagement. When we started the programme, overall engagement at Contact was 56%. Three years later this has risen to 77%.

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> **improvements in plant reliability and availability**
> **increased engagement from 56% to 77%**

Through all of this Acumen has been a trusted and truly collaborative partner. Their focus on the cultural and personal beliefs of our leaders has enabled us to unlock the self-limiting behaviours that were constraining our improvement. Through the Leadership Culture Programme they have enabled us to respond and help deliver a lasting, positive impact on culture, and given us the adaptability and resilience to face change in new and innovative ways. Not once did we feel that Acumen wanted to 'own' the programme. Instead, they supported us to step up and lead the programme as our capability improved, knowing that handing over leadership was core to its success and to creating enduring capability in our leaders. The success of this programme has led us to imbed positive change deeper into the business and engage Acumen further to help us train a cohort of front line workers and managers as Continuous Improvement (CI) Facilitators. As a direct output from the internal CI Facilitators, hundreds of continuous improvement initiatives have been identified and implemented, delivering over $5 million in cost savings and around $11 million of earnings improvement.

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Acumen Global Partners are grateful to Contact for writing and sharing this case study with us.

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What Acumen Did

WALKING THE TALK

A group of approximately 17 influential leaders from key points of influence received one-on-one coaching over nine months to ensure they role modelled and embodied the desired change.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS

Approximately 45 next-level leaders from previously siloed sites attended half-day developmental workshops every six weeks over nine months. These sessions embedded a shared learning language that leaders applied to strategic challenges in real time.

EXTENDING ACROSS THE BUSINESS

Employees applied to lead small groups, and a selected few were developed by Acumen to broaden the initiative. Continuous Improvement Facilitators (Convenors) led scheduled small-group conversations, encouraging innovation and local problem-solving with a focus on continuous improvement.

ACCELERATING CHANGE IN CRITICAL AREAS

Business units engaged Acumen directly to deepen and accelerate the change at local levels, mainly through workshops for site leadership and extended teams. This boosted engagement and drew more people into shaping solutions.

ENDORSING & REINFORCING THE NEW DESIRED BEHAVIOURS & SUCCESS OUTCOMES

The client reinforced progress through central communications and by collecting and sharing success stories that acknowledged individuals and teams in personal and meaningful ways.

GENERATING MOMENTUM WITH A SMALL GROUP OF COMMITTED LEADERS

A 'Momentum' team (SteerCo), composed of executives from across the business, was formed at the outset to lead and champion the change initiative.

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