

VISIBLE VALUE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME - A MEASURABLE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

THE BACKGROUND

Oakridge worked with Ascom to deliver a Talent Development Programme for sixteen high potential leaders each year. The relationship was extended and Oakridge jointly designed and co-facilitated with David Whitehead, Head of Learning and Development for Ascom Group, an extensive Leadership Development Programme for twelve of the Senior Executives drawn from Europe, Asia Pacific and the US.

At a time when financial considerations often limit leadership development activity the investment Ascom was prepared to make, to bring this group to Switzerland for an extensive four day programme was considerable. Both its Divisions had been through significant restructuring, market conditions continued to present challenges both in controlling costs and securing revenue, and any financial spend needed to see a very real return on investment. It would not be sufficient simply to have positive comments on feedback sheets or the usual feel-good remarks of the few lucky delegates. Instead any leadership programme needed to deliver tangible value, which the Board, the employees, and the stakeholders could see had been a worthwhile investment of time and money.

“Leadership programmes that set real tasks could deliver real value.”



The initial design phase.

Worthy but...

Oakridge and Ascom working together was a pleasure - both through face to face meetings, teleconferences, Skype calls, e-mails, and an incessant exchange of articles and ideas through 'Dropbox' made the geographic distance between Manchester and Switzerland of no consequence at all. The ideas flowed, were held up to the light - some made it through, others joined the pile "nice idea but...".

Essentially what was being sought was a programme which really challenged leaders, held them to account, allowed them the chance to extend the current business and enabled them to reflect. There was also a need to stimulate thinking, open minds to new ideas and widen horizons. Inevitably a focus on how to lead others was needed. The list was seemingly endless and in common with so many leadership programmes there was a danger of cramming a truncated MBA programme into four days.

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The programme initially had a very conventional feel to it:

Prior to the programme, the 360 Transformational Leader Inventory was used to look at the ability of participants to engage and inspire others (self-awareness)

- A series of evening seminars took place with guest speakers to challenge thinking on Innovation and Internationalisation. **(Thinking outside the box)**
- Time with the Chair and the CEO of Ascom was set-up to understand first-hand the strategy and the current operating imperatives **(Aligning to the business)**
- Designed time to network with each other to deepen understanding of the two core businesses **(Deepening understanding)**
- Development of key leadership skills in terms of coaching others, identifying talent, engaging others. **(Tools and techniques for contemporary leaders)**

It was a good programme, well-designed, thoughtful, interesting, and clearly linked to the Ascom strategy. But, frankly, it still lacked that spark.

- There was just not enough challenge for action hungry participants.
- No compulsion to demonstrate real leadership capability.
- Limited impact beyond the four days in the classroom.
- Limited opportunity to tap in to the talent of the individuals to do anything useful.
- It was not compelling enough for participants to feel excited and engaged.

Most of all, such a programme could not justify the investment needed especially at a time when the whole company was exercising financial restraint. Both David and Oakridge remained self critical, wrestling with the issue and resolute in their determination not to end up with “just another leadership event” at a time when more was needed.

A transformational breakthrough - Mission Critical Leadership Projects

Simple enough, but so often overlooked, this should be a Senior Leadership Programme which set participants the task of either generating new revenue or implementing operating efficiencies which would reduce costs. Indeed such “Mission Critical Projects” would be at the heart of the programme placing participants in the spotlight and demanding from them real leadership results.

These were exceptional people, keen to make a difference, only too willing to contribute to real issues and as leaders continuing to build their careers aware of the opportunity to showcase their capability to the Board.

David’s previous experience in running programmes setting ‘100 day “Business Impact Projects” for aspiring leaders had already given a strong indication that leadership programmes which set real tasks could deliver real value. Indeed leadership development programmes could make money not cost money if properly designed, run, and followed-up. After all, here were experienced and highly talented individuals drawn from across the world. They worked within a business where designing innovative solutions is the true value of all that they do. It was time to apply this to their own leadership effectiveness and to the needs of Ascom.

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Here was the voice of “modern L&D” talking. David was wanting to ensure that Learning and Development was not seen as a “cost” but a “creator of value”, contributing to Ascom’s business objectives not depleting its resources. His previous experience with the Business Impact Projects indicated that a even more challenging time-frame was possible although possible unacceptable to the company.

The challenge was fully supported by the CEO when presented with the draft outline. He wanted leaders on the programme to deliver solutions to issues that either increase revenue to boost growth or reduce costs to improve operating efficiency. Moreover he wanted all those participating in the programme to come up with at least one revenue generating or cost-saving proposal. Already an expectation on leaders was being made: now they must rise to the challenge. The CEO was eager to personally “own” one project as a “customer” and mandated that the two Division chiefs would each own another. Furthermore, he fully supported David’s challenging time-frame of 60 days (two months).

Working on such projects would enable leaders to put their capabilities to the test, to draw from the insights the programme gave them into the needs of the business, their own leadership styles, and the ways to engage and inspire others. They would need to work collaboratively, not simply in isolation, to be inclusive in approach and to “get things done” as leaders rather than simply working in their own bubble of expertise. They would have to work outside of the usual business processes and time schedules and use their influencing abilities to move actions much faster than usual. The project “customers” would not be there to assist - rather they would be expecting updates each fortnight and act as a “demanding” client.

OUR APPROACH

The “Mission Critical Projects” became a central tenet of the entire Leadership Programme and approximately 25% of the programme time was spent on its further development. The other aspects of the leadership programme remained in place and indeed provided some of the challenge to thinking and tools needed. It was an intensive but highly stimulating four days. Specific to the Mission Critical Projects

1. Prior to the leadership programme all twelve delegates were required to generate ideas for revenue generation or improving operational efficiency. They could discuss this with colleagues and then submit a one-two page business case which was reviewed by the Board of Ascom. Their business case needed to be cogent, compelling and realisable within 60 days - demonstrating their ability as leaders not only to identify issues but to come up with solutions.
2. From the twelve submissions some six were selected for formal presentations at the Leadership Event to the CEO, and the other delegates. Based on the presentations a final vote took place and three projects were selected. Leaders needed to demonstrate their ability to make presentations, to persuade others, and to show-case their ideas to secure support.
3. During the main leadership development programme teams were formed to scope out the issues in more detail and to build project plans. This gave the opportunity for leaders to work collaboratively together and to focus on the task, the resources needed, and the risks. Again, key leadership skills to put into action.
4. Following the leadership development programme work continued on the Mission Critical Projects sometimes bringing in more team members. Fortnightly telephone conference calls were held augmented by written project update reports.

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RESULTS

Leaders on the programme enjoyed having something practical and something “real” to do - it felt as if their talents were not only being recognised but also being used and the showcasing with colleagues and members of the Board clearly raised profiles. It was, in short, an opportunity to demonstrate real leadership capability in a high-octane setting and where the stakes were high.

Three “Mission Critical Projects” went forward and within the 60 days have reported as projects. During the next year it will be David’s job to track and measure the business impact, including the impact on revenue and on cost reduction. Already significant savings have occurred and some extremely valuable learning has been generated.

In addition, one of the projects made substantial inroads to the culture change needed from a strong technical and engineering driven organisation to a much more customer benefits focussed business.

FINANCIAL RETURN

Evidence from the past three years of similar “Business Impact Projects” set on the sixteen participants each show an outstanding visible value from putting leaders on the spot and expecting them to use their talent to produce results. It must be emphasised that the projects were over and above the “day job” and would not have happened if there had not been the leadership development programme. Their contribution to revenue and cost reduction were directly attributable to the leadership programme held each year.

- In the first year: revenue gain and cost savings of **£845,000**
- In the second year : revenue gain and cost savings of **£1.26 million**
- In the third year: revenue gain and cost savings of **£1.4 million**

Now that is what we can call a “Visible Value Leadership Programme” worth running in any organisation at any time. Call us to discuss further - we can help you achieve similar results for your organisation.

Ascom is an international provider of Mission Critical Communication solutions. The company focuses on the areas of Wireless solutions (for healthcare, fire-services, armed forces, care homes, hotels etc.) and Network Testing (for optimisation of mobile technology).

With a wealth of experience in implementing complex projects for discerning customers, Ascom has established itself in important key markets. Offerings range from analysis and consulting to system design and system integration, project management, engineering and implementation, right through to maintenance and support.

The company has subsidiaries in approx. 17 countries and a workforce of some 1900 employees worldwide.

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