



Leadership and Learning: No Pain, No Gain

Problem

A midsize aerospace manufacturer faced significant challenges. The industry experienced significant decline, forcing suppliers to become more effective while increasing quality and decreasing costs. The founder/owner, who was CEO for 30 years, retired and sold the company to a holding group. As part of the sale, the founder/owner negotiated for his son to become the new President (BCG was extremely involved in leadership development for the son as part of the succession process).

The President, 43 years old, recognized the need to significantly propel performance. His initial challenge was the management team: self-described "alpha males" with an average tenure of 18 years. Technically competent and extremely loyal, they held remarkably outdated beliefs about leadership. Without a high-performing management team, the future of the company was in jeopardy.

Goals

BCG was engaged to facilitate a new organizational culture. Desired results included:

- Strong and effective teamwork: within and between departments.
- True commitment to people: treatment, policies, and learning/development.
- Free exchange of information and ideas in an atmosphere of openness and trust.
- Future planning as opposed to crisis management.

Recommendation:

BCG recommended a unique approach designed to maximize long-term success while confronting resistance to change. The senior management team would meet each Friday morning. The first and third Friday's review strategic and operational issues: current vs. planned performance, strategic items, financials, sales, etc. The second and fourth Fridays are dedicated to leadership/learning.

The second Friday the team focuses on organizational culture: what is it vs. what they would like it to be. The team examines the current forces that help and hinder desired results. The focus is to create clarity around direction and priorities while aligning the team toward common objectives.

The fourth Friday is dedicated to learning. BCG recommended a book on leadership that outlines eight characteristics of leaders. Each team member presents chapters to their peers in the form of a “book report” with facilitation/coaching by BCG. The process was initially viewed by team members as threatening, especially by those without a formal educational background. Talking about production, quality, or financials was easy: exposing oneself by leading a conversation on leadership raised the discomfort level to new heights. However, it was acknowledged that change is difficult, and often requires discomfort. Our goal was to create a team dynamic where candidness, free-flow of ideas, and vulnerability is the norm: an ambitious target not accomplished with conventional means.

Results

The initial meetings with the management team can be described as cautious, at best. However, the process quickly changed as the team embarked upon the process of mutual learning. Old stereotypes were openly discussed, and team members began sharing their personal views, ambitions, and challenges. Boring meetings that purposely avoided controversial topics have been replaced by lively dialogue on real problems. The self-described “alpha males” that were accustomed to fighting amongst themselves have united to focus their energies on common goals and objectives.

BCG Services:

BCG has considerable experience building high-performance teams while shaping organizational culture. We are equally committed to creating innovative approaches to complex problems.