

# Creating a culture of improvement - *Talk* as the medium for change

*Submission to*

**The Association for Business Psychology (ABP) 2017.**

**Shortlisted in categories of 'Excellence in Change Management' and 'Excellence in Innovation in Business Psychology'.**

## Project summary

This project demonstrates the successful application of SoundWave for building the quality and character of human social interaction in the workplace and new ways of building the leadership skills necessary for the creation of a culture of improvement or 'Enterprise Excellence'.

The context for application of these approaches lies within a mature pharmaceutical company located in Northern Europe with historically high financial returns and a culture which has traditionally challenged the value of change and improvement.

The project will outline clear benefits achieved at an individual and organisational level and reference continuous and close stakeholder engagement.

## The Challenge

Contextually, the challenge was clear - achieve the conditions necessary to create and sustain a culture of improvement. Research in this field over a thirty year period makes clear that the differentiator in sustainable improvement cultures lies in the quality and character of human social interaction. The research most often describes this requirement by using the language of values and behaviours.

A culture on Enterprise Excellence requires a set of highly specific social interactions. Depending on the phase of Enterprise Excellence maturity (reactive; standardised; pro-active), leaders, managers and professionals need to be able to move quickly and seamlessly between a momentary correctional style of leading and an open, more Socratic style of coaching. This range, or repertoire, is tricky for many managers whose natural tendency is to be closer to the one or the other both by way of skill and by way of attitude. But without this versatility, a culture of improvement, with its concomitant high levels of engagement, is difficult to achieve.

A thorough, stakeholder-led assessment of the existing maturity of this company's climate for successful Enterprise Excellence (A Shingo assessment undertaken by S A Partners LLP) found compelling evidence of modest levels of employee engagement and a leadership style which hovered between a *directive* and a *suggestive* style, driving inadequate accountability and limited discretionary effort on the part of employees.

A target was set to move the business over a twelve month period to the next level of maturity. This next level would evidence a much stronger 'inquiry-led' (or coaching) style of leadership known to be critical to successful Enterprise Excellence. It would also begin to evidence improvements to the pace of improvement and the bottom line results of the organisation.

Barriers to be addressed included a series of early attempts at Enterprise Excellence that had gained only limited traction, a management population unaware of the new skill demands of Enterprise Excellence, an employee relations environment felt to be contentious and limiting of an Improvement culture and suspicion at how 'behavioural change' could be helpful. These background circumstances required that confidence in the consultant-client relationship be established quickly and that the leadership team could understand the benefits that they personally and the organisation generally would achieve if commitment were made. Excellent early delivery within the programme design and approach needed to make this possible.

## The Approach

Beginning with the Executive Team (10) a programme of 'Leadership Coaching' development was undertaken ultimately incorporating the sixty (60) most senior managers in the business.

An initial design was concluded for the engagement and was subject to frequent review with the client organisation adapting and tailoring the approach.

SoundWave analytics provided the critical innovation. SoundWave provides managers with insight into the way they use language, construct dialogue and the impact this has on the thoughts, feelings and actions of people. Rather than focus on behavioural styles, personality typologies and competence frameworks, SoundWave views human social interaction through the lens of 'talk'. The nine SoundWave voices (or verbal strategies) serve to demonstrate how different preferences and patterns can be used to shift the style of interaction in a way that the particular context of Enterprise Excellence demands.

The SoundWave model is 'sticky' and became the bedrock of the programme. It allowed managers to view themselves as broadly unique in their preferences for dialogue and yet capable, through the adoption of the appropriate pattern, of styles of interaction that were less natural for them. Learning to coach could take place without a reliance on conventional models of coaching structure. Rather, managers were invited to fall back on a more intuitive, naturalistic preference and to re-acquaint themselves with the malleability of language.

The programme structure moved from theory to practice and over the course of three, two-day workshops (this was a serious commitment from the leadership team) themed around 'Tendency' - how I naturally prefer to interact and construct my dialogue; 'Skill' - how I actually interact and how I build-in greater flexibility and; 'Sensitivity' - becoming acutely aware of when to shift my dialogue towards or away from a more inquiry-led style.

Between the workshops, participants undertook intense one-to-one coaching sessions with a consultant over a two hour period. This 'reverse-coaching' had each participant coach the consultant receiving real-time feedback. In the latter sessions, participants were observed in the workplace and provided with feedback and coaching and/or were recorded in their interactions and analysed and made sense of the impact of their style on others'. The demanding nature of these (and other) developmental practices were critical in driving skill improvements.

As the programme was extended groups were 'en-folded'. They met, shared experiences and agreed on commitments to continue to practice and apply the new capabilities. This had the effect of aligning behaviour as well as maintaining effort. It was often at these meetings that client-led enhancements to the programme were mooted and it was here that a community of practice developed.

A year into the programme consultants and client agreed to further increase the effort in developing the skills of social interaction. The programme had heightened awareness and sensitivity to the role of 'talk' in social interaction. Now it was time to receive real feedback by using SoundWave360.

SoundWave360 provided participants with insight not only into how they think they talk but into how they are actually heard. The feedback is powerful and actionable. It specifies how different stakeholder groups might hear an individual in different ways alerting them to how they adapt their dialogue depending on the type of social situation or pressure they are experiencing. From this perspective, individuals become better able to address particular relationships in specific ways, for example by challenging others more or less.

At the time of writing, the programme is fourteen months into a twenty month journey but results are already identifiable and with very high levels of leadership engagement, the culture is changing.

## Outcome Evaluation

The programme has sought to evaluate its effectiveness in four ways against the requirement to achieve the conditions necessary to create and sustain a culture of improvement.<sup>33</sup>

*Firstly, have participants extended their range of social interaction to accommodate a more inquiry-led (coaching) style?*

- Simple self and peer assessments in workshops attest to a noticeable improvement in coaching capability
- Workplace (or naturalistic) observations of participants by consultants attest to improved but imperfect skills application across a range of situations. These have included supervisor-subordinate weekly 1-2-1 updates; facilitating meetings as part of the Tiered Meeting Structure; 'Go-Look-See' Gemba walks and formal coaching meetings
- Structured interviews with a random sample of participants confirm that individuals can cite many situations in which they have consciously coached and achieved good outcomes

- Structured interviews with a random sample of 'coachees' confirm that their managers are inquiring more and that there are positive benefits from this experience.
- Early SoundWave360 results elicit strongly heightened self-awareness of next developmental steps to be taken

*Secondly, has the Shingo maturity assessment reached its target twelve months on?*

- The requirement on a three point scale (0-3) is for the business to move from an initial score of 0.87 to a score of 1.3. The assessment is formally due to be undertaken in the Autumn of 2017 but early, informal assessments undertaken by the expert consulting firm, S A Partners LLP, indicates a strong likelihood of reaching this target.

*Thirdly, what effect if any has there been on business performance?*

- 2016 was a difficult year for the business. The first quarter of 2017 has seen an uplift in overall performance compared with the same period last year. Specifically, there have been zero batch rejections and customer delivery has been 100% on time, in full.
- There have been no technical investments of significance in this period that might account for this improvement but as part of the programme of Enterprise Excellence, there have been important investments in 'process management' and the tiered meeting process is the most conspicuous example of this. This has afforded the business greater visibility of production status and enabled the earlier elimination of risks and problems. It is an accepted fact, however, that the improved social interaction of managers has been 'the oil in the wheels' in running these meetings.
- Perhaps most importantly has been the increased incidence of shop-floor initiated and led improvements. A number of these attest to the increased use of discretionary effort by employees and harnessing this development represents the direction of travel of this engagement.

What have been the key learnings so far?

- The more the coaching practice centres on real-world observations the more impactful it is
- Audio recordings of naturalistic conversations in which the coach listens to and analyses their own voice for its impact on others has greater learning benefits the expected
- Making available SoundWave360 data earlier in the programme would, in the clients view, be more beneficial.

**Kevin Charles Eyre**  
**Creator of SoundWave**  
**Director, SoundWave Global Limited**  
**2017**