

FORECASTING



GREAT SERVICE

By Sue Kennedy and Chris Musselwhite

HOW UNIVERSAL WEATHER AND AVIATION USED EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT TO LIFT CUSTOMER SERVICE OUT OF THE CLOUDS AND INTO THE CLEAR.

Since 1959, Universal Weather and Aviation has been a pioneer of international flight support services for corporate aviation. First-rate, personalized client service had helped Universal find success in in the industry, and it eventually became evident that the business would need to advance to the next level.

CEO and owner Greg Evans, along with Universal President Ralph Vasami realized the challenges this would present to their business model and set out to ensure that both Universal's people and processes could handle the demands of rapid growth.

A successful multiyear learning initiative has helped Universal maintain a customer and employee focus as the company continues its growth.

GETTING STARTED

"If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else." This quote by David Campbell, author of a book of the same title, illus-

trates Universal's starting point. Senior leaders agreed to begin with a clarification of the present state and heeded the recommendation of the Denison Organizational Culture Survey (DOCS) as one of the initial assessment tools.

A culture survey helps leaders, stakeholders, and employees better understand the impact that culture has on the organization's effectiveness. And in identifying strengths and weaknesses, leaders can begin to encourage and nurture behaviors that drive organizational performance.

The culture survey provided information that validated Universal's strong customer focus as well as the need to clarify vision, create goal and direction alignment, and reengage employees with core values upon which the company was built. Using survey results, management agreed to focus development on three areas: work processes and systems, interdepartmental communications and information exchange, and cross-department teamwork.



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Teamwork and communications enable trip support specialists to act as a vital extension of a client's flight operations team.

Management recognized that the initiative's success hinged on engagement of the hearts and minds of employees. The primary goal was to empower employees to streamline processes and eliminate redundancy.

CLARIFYING THE VISION

Executive involvement is critical to the success of any change initiative, and at Universal it had been all hands on deck since the beginning.

During a series of planning retreats, Universal executives developed a more robust service vision as the key organizational development goal. Vasami and the newly created Customer CARE (customers are really everything) team crafted a service vision along with enhanced core values. The company's overall positioning and vision were revised to bolster the emphasis on the customer and the employee.

Service vision. To become customer-centric in the core business, creating seamless service and an enjoyable flight experience from start to finish.

Positioning. To be a vital extension of the flight operations team of corporate aircraft operators, with global resources to know the world like no one else.

Vision. To be the provider of choice by exceeding each client's expectations; to be the employer of choice through training and development and reward for performance and teamwork; and

to be the global leader in corporate aviation support through strategic alliances, acquisition, and investment.

ENGAGING EMPLOYEES

Universal's management recognized that the initiative's success hinged on engagement of the hearts and minds of employees. The primary goal was to empower employees to streamline processes and eliminate redundancy.

It was understood that increasing cross-department collaboration is only possible when employees fully understand the benefits of working across organizational boundaries. So an active learning experience in the form of a business simulation that was research-based and related to Universal's business was pursued. The supporting idea was that adults who experience real-world situations during simulated learning experiences are much more likely to learn solutions and applications that will be successful in the actual work environment.

PaperPlanes Inc., a project management simulation designed to uncover barriers to organizational success while providing insights into creative solutions and teamwork, was select-

ed. The goal of the simulation was to jumpstart cross-company quality design projects to automate manual processes that were negatively affecting service quality for Universal clients.

The business simulation was ideal because participants deal with the three opportunities identified in Universal's culture survey—efficient processes, interdepartmental communications, and teamwork across organizational boundaries. Participants have three “runs” of the simulation to produce high-quality paper airplanes. They can redesign work processes between each run to increase the number of high-quality planes sold to the customer.

To make it even more relevant for Universal employees, Vasami played the role of the customer, injecting real service quality expectations and concerns. Employees commented that Vasami represented what their clients' value most—accurate and timely service delivery.

As a result, the simulation felt very real, even to Evans who played the role of notcher, which is in the middle of the production process. “It wasn't until the end of the debrief session after the second run that I realized I was one of the major causes of our team's failure in the first run,” says Evans, commenting on his new-found awareness.

LINKING CHANGE STYLES AND CHANGE INITIATIVES

The next step was for leaders and managers across the company to better understand the personal challenges associated with change. The tool selected was the Change Style Indicator (CSI), an assessment instrument designed to measure a person's preferred style in dealing with change.

This assessment instrument places participants on a continuum from “conservator” (least likely to initiate change) to “originator” (most likely to initiate change). A third style, “pragmatist,” occupies the middle of the range. These three style preferences are displayed when approaching change.

Conservers prefer to create incremental changes. When facing

change, conservers appear deliberate, disciplined, and organized; prefer change that maintains the current structure; may operate from conventional assumptions; enjoy predictability; may appear cautious and inflexible; and honor tradition and established practices.

Pragmatists deal in outcomes and seek functional solutions to problems. When facing change, pragmatists appear practical, agreeable, and flexible; operate as mediators and catalysts for understanding; are open to both sides of an argument; may take more of a middle-of-the-road approach; and appear more team-oriented.

Originators sometimes favor something that's different just because it is that—different. When facing change, originators may appear unorganized, undisciplined, unconventional, and spontaneous; prefer change that challenges current structure; will likely challenge accepted assumptions; enjoy risk and uncertainty; may be impractical and miss important details; may appear as visionary and systemic in their thinking; and can treat accepted policies and procedures with little regard.

Personal change preferences are often confused with change competency. A conservator may be perceived as too cautious or as a procrastinator. An originator might be seen as being impulsive and unfocused. In turn, she might consider conservers as obstacles to progress. If a co-worker is a pragmatist, a conservator might view him as indecisive. Likewise the pragmatist might understand the conservator point of view, but think that they are too risk-averse.

The real value of the CSI comes from awareness of the differences of the three styles. If you can recognize differences in change styles in yourself and others, you can better communicate and implement change, facing fewer misunderstandings, complaints, and saboteurs along the way.

Beyond the value of understanding your individual change style, Universal executives identified a correlation between their originator style and

Universal's challenge to adapt its highly successful entrepreneurial culture to create end-to-end streamlined processes.

Details matter when it comes to quality and process work. Conservers understand this, but originators don't tend to pay a lot of attention to how things get done. The key to success in designing any quality process is in managing the hand-off of information between groups.

Using this newly gained awareness, originator executives realized the need to enlist conservers and pragmatists to achieve the company's desired service goals.

“There is no way you can facilitate 50-plus locations and all the third-party variables around the world with standards of service if you're not aligned,” says Vasami. “Used together, the change-style assessment and the simulation learning experience were invaluable in helping our executives identify behaviors and cultural norms that had to change if we were to gain the alignment necessary to improve efficiencies.”

Based on this early success, the change-style assessment was used in several additional active learning components of the initiative, including the customized change management best practices workshops.

FOCUSING ON THE FRONT LINE

As Universal began work on streamlining the process, increasing teamwork, and improving interdepartmental communication, a new learning strategy evolved. To help employees understand how they contributed to Universal's success, all employees were trained to write SMART (specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and time-bound) goals that were aligned to the company vision.

To support this strategy, supervisory and managerial roles were redefined so that managers would play a greater role in coaching employees toward goal achievement. A workshop called “Performing in Your New Role” was launched as part of a managerial training program called “Coaching



The simulation PaperPlanes Inc., identifies obstacles to efficiently managing client trips from departure to arrival.

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for Peak Performance.” The session was designed to help participants better understand their roles as coaches and managers; key factors for coaching; and how to lead people, manage resources, and supervise work performance.

Additional support came in the form of GoalGetter, an online performance support system that guides individuals through learning and the application of new skills and behaviors. Designed into the program as a personal development planning tool, GoalGetter was used by participants to establish five developmental goals, indicating up to 10 observers (including the person’s direct supervisor) who would provide confidential feedback on their progress three months later.

The transition from experienced superworker to new supervisor or manager is not always an easy one, and making the transition from a command-and-control manager to coach is equally difficult.

GoalGetter enabled Universal to provide managers with personalized plans for development that included

follow-up assessments to measure their impact and behavior changes. In a 12-week period, more than 300 observers completing follow-up assessments said that 65 managers improved their effectiveness scores by an average of almost 21 percent.

RESULTS

Universal’s focus on the company’s long-term vision and the development of its employees through assessment, experiential learning, and personalized goal setting has paid off. In a second Denison Culture Survey conducted five years later, the company increased results in the categories corresponding to employee involvement and process consistency, while improving further in customer focus and alignment to their overall strategic direction and vision.

In addition, the company saw a direct link between upper management’s unwavering, long-term commitment to employee development, and the success of the initiatives. Change is always difficult, and culture change is even harder. Both required dedication and consistency from senior executives at Universal.

When Universal created its vision to be the employer of choice, it set the bar high while providing the development tools to ensure that employees have what they need to reach these goals. Personalized development plans helped participants become better equipped to make a smooth transition into new management positions.

“Our purpose from the beginning of the project was to create evolutionary, sustainable change that would serve our company for another 40 years,” says Evans. And according to Vasami, the strategy for success was always clear to Universal’s management.

“People respond when you start with a compelling reason of why you need to change,” says Vasami. “When you communicate that vision in a way that creates passion, aligns goals with performance, and provides training and support, it makes employees want to become engaged.”

Vasami agrees that commitment at all levels of the organization is fundamental in sustaining change.

“Increased involvement of employees in planning and implementing change early on gets everyone headed in the same direction and pays off for the organization, its people, and its customers. ...Everybody wants to make more money, but the way we define success at Universal is by customer and employee satisfaction.” **T+D**

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