

International Accounting Firm Strengthens New Leadership Using MBTI® Instrument

A Case Study of Ernst & Young



Ernst & Young believe that by understanding yourself, you can understand your impact on others and through this you can lead the business effectively. This philosophy formed the backbone of a series of leadership development seminars introduced to the firm which aimed to: manage change following a restructure; align development to the Ernst & Young leadership values; encourage the development of interpersonal skills; and gain momentum at the start of the business year.

The restructure brought together two considerable Ernst & Young business units into one, with a workforce of approximately 1,200 and a leadership group (directors and partners) of around 100. To ensure this new leadership group had clarity and consistency around the direction of the new business, and enable it to share this information to excite, motivate and empower the wider employee base, the development seminars aimed to refresh and refocus existing leadership skills, concentrating more on interpersonal qualities rather than technical ability.

SEMINAR DESIGN

Nicki Jefferies, Regional HR Director, decided to achieve this by training delegates in the application of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) personality questionnaire, working closely with OPP.

She explains, “the MBTI questionnaire values all personality types and focuses on individual strengths. This was valuable for increasing the partners’ confidence. They were already familiar with the questionnaire, which meant there was a common language.”

Ernst & Young decided to use the MBTI Step II questionnaire. Based on the same four dichotomies as the MBTI

Step I questionnaire, this provides in-depth perspective around interpersonal, communication and problem-solving styles.

Jefferies comments, “we chose the Step II instrument because it gives the partners something new. It gives people more insight into their behaviors and more clarity over identifying their type.” Richard King, who leads the newly merged South region, was already appreciative of MBTI benefits, which meant that support for the seminars existed from the top of the organization.

The seminars were designed to be seen as part of a development journey, rather than isolated events. Initially, Ernst & Young only planned to run two, but after seeing the results of these, decided to run more.

GAINING MOMENTUM

The launch of the first event, called Momentum, took place in January 2004 for the leadership group of 100 partners and directors. This was followed by an event in June 2004 which coincided with the new business year. This encouraged a focus on delivering results for the year ahead. In advance of the day, delegates completed the MBTI Step II questionnaire.

OPP consultants then spent the first part of the workshops providing feedback in groups of 20. Delegates spent time discussing what the preferences meant, grouping together with people of similar and opposing preferences to understand their perspectives. They discussed this with reference to their own leadership styles, identifying what worked well, and what they would like to improve on. They also grouped together with those they usually work with, to understand each other’s styles.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM MBTI USE

Ernst & Young regularly conduct quarterly staff opinion surveys. These include questions about the perceived quality of leadership and whether leaders are seen to live the firm’s values. Another aim of the seminars was to engage those staff who expressed neutral opinions.

Since the introduction of the MBTI seminars, survey results from June 2004 have shown quarter on quarter improvements

in performance, particularly in the key areas of leadership and desire of people to remain with the firm.

The improvements have been such that Ernst & Young is top of all the national business units in its people performance. Jefferies comments, “focusing on these areas has made a real difference to staff morale and demonstrated that the partners care.”

THE INSPIRATION ELEMENT

Each Momentum event sought to inspire the leadership group not only by encouraging personal development, but also to bring in external inspiration in the form of motivational speakers. These included Jeff Cook, the England rugby team coach, and Miles Hilton-Barber, the blind sportsman whose feats include climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, crossing the Qatar desert and flying a Microlite across the English channel.

Jefferies comments, “we wanted the seminars to be about winning hearts and minds – winning delegates’ emotional as well as rational commitment. The attitude from the partners has been that if the speakers can meet those challenges, then they can meet theirs.”

DIRECTION SETTING TEAM

Following the success of these seminars, Ernst & Young decided to run a communications-focused event for their

Direction Setting Team. This is a leadership group of eight senior partners, comprising business and industry leaders.

It is important for the team to have open communications so that they function smoothly and efficiently, a challenge when they are located in different parts of the country. Trying to maintain the team identity and feeling is likened by Jefferies to the one facing the England football team, where the players have a match together but return to their respective clubs at the end of the day.

To overcome this, OPP ran a program for this group, again using the MBTI approach. Delegate feedback was again positive. They said that although they had always thought that the MBTI framework was interesting, they had not appreciated the value that it could add until now.

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