

SIMPLY THE BEST



Ahead of separation from RBS Group, Direct Line Group needed to engage 16,000 employees who were facing much uncertainty. PAUL DIGGINS, Head of Internal Communications at Direct Line Group, explains how it was done.

THE CHALLENGE

Direct Line Group, formerly part of the RBS Group, consisted of six primary brands, with 16,000 employees spread over nearly 50 locations across the UK.

Ahead of separation from RBS Group, Direct Line Group was faced with a considerable amount of uncertainty, so wanted to engage employees across all areas of the business in defining culture and behaviours to underpin the new company.

Of prime concern was ensuring the process was truly 'bottom-up'. The key to success in getting the employee population to truly 'buy into' the new organisation was involving them in the process and encouraging them to drive the change themselves.

THE STRATEGY

The rationale behind our approach was simple – this needed to feel different to anything that had been done before. Historically, the culture was paternalistic, with the methods of communication and tone of voice perceived as 'parent-to-child' rather than 'adult-to-adult'. Our aim was to completely turn this on its head, taking employee involvement in the change programme beyond simply understanding business goals and requirements, and give them the opportunity to shape the values of the new company and identify the behaviours required to deliver the vision.

We created 'BEST', a communications and engagement programme delivered through a range of media, to involve employees in shaping the future

organisation. The essence of the programme was to encourage dialogue from the bottom up, drawing on the experience people at every level of the business, cutting across 'silos'.

EXECUTION

Across the three stages of 'BEST' – Best for our People, Customers and Shareholders – the Employee Representative Body (ERB) led workshops using 'appreciative inquiry' methodology. This empowered employees to take ownership when identifying what was required to be 'BEST'. The onus was on individuals to drive change, encouraging an 'us, not them' attitude. A pioneering step for the company, it gave employees an integral role in changing the culture of the business.

ROLE MODEL: CREATING AN OPEN CULTURE

Best-quest.co.uk was also designed and built, creating an online community for employees, encouraging conversation and debate, and promoting the idea of sharing best practice. This prompted the breakdown of the 'silo culture', stimulating cross-brand, cross-functional discussions between people at all levels in the company such as contact centre employees and senior executives. It allowed employees to have a voice, which was something that had never truly been encouraged before.

Ahead of the workshops, we ran full-day training sessions for the ERB, providing them with comprehensive facilitator training and guidebooks. We created an online portal that enabled them to share insights, as well as providing a place for key documents and advice.

During Phase 1, employees were encouraged to think about how they could drive the changes necessary to make the business 'Best for Our People'. This included anything from making an effort to smile more; to creating more comprehensive personal development plans; to making team video diaries to celebrate great weeks. It encouraged employees to look at pockets of best practice and amplify these across the business.

Phase 2 focused on 'Best for Customer'. Two workbooks provided stimulus for the workshops and explained our vision, their profile, our brands and answered questions on what the business could do to deliver on customer vision.

Phase 3 focused on the shareholder, with workshops led by people managers. A 'Best for Shareholder' online learning workshop was developed to help employees understand the importance of shareholders.

PROOF THAT IT WORKED

Over 10,000 employees went through the Best for Our People and Customer workshops. Best for Shareholder was even more successful, with over 12,000 people completing the online learning workshop.

Membership and activity on Best-quest.co.uk has exceeded all expectations; over 30% of the employee population are regular, active users – remarkable in comparison to other social media sites. To date, there is a total of 6,862 users, 8,573 posts, 7,259 likes, 1,917 posters and 1,014 topics. Hundreds of topics and thousands of threads feature on Best-quest.co.uk,

with key 'big ticket' items continually tracked. Of the 37 of these major topics, three are now part of 'business as usual' activity, 22 are items with an action plan to fix and 12 are being addressed by Special Interest Groups who are directly accountable to the Best Board, who continue to meet every six weeks.

VALUE ADDED

Few employees are given the opportunity to define the future of their company. 'BEST', through its 'bottom-up' approach, has set the benchmark of a new way of doing things. New contracts were issued to employees following the launch of the new company in this way. 99.8% of employees signed the new contracts, an indication of their commitment.

'BEST' has created an open culture where employees are encouraged to give honest feedback. Best-quest.co.uk is one place where they can do this, with membership increasing weekly, despite the workshop phase of 'BEST' ending.

Recently, the Human Resources Director wrote an apology to employees based on negative feedback on the intranet regarding human resources issues. He

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stated that the HR function had fallen short of its aspiration to care about the 'employee experience' and emphasised that he wanted to get it right next time. With 3,726 hits and 29 comments, the positive feedback was incredible.

'BEST' is not over - it has developed into business as usual, and continues with Best-quest.co.uk, a regular 'Best Board' and assigned Special Interest Groups, which are tasked with addressing specific issues or ideas that have arisen from 'BEST'.

As Paul Geddes, CEO, Direct Line Group, adds: 'There is engagement in 'BEST' from the top. We've got a new logo and new name, but now these new values are the heart of our company. They were given to us by the people of this organisation – they said, "These are the values we want." Now we need to create a climate where everyone can live by them.' ■



Above: A 'Best for Shareholder' online learning workshop was developed.

