Coca-Cola Latin America - a virtual programme to develop organisational capability and capacity for Managing Virtual Teams

Background

In response to a business imperative to minimise cost, avoid duplication and leverage capability, Coca-Cola Latin America began the implantation of a virtual team structure for elements of its commercial products supply technical groups based across Latin America. This was prioritised as a strategic initiative for Coca-Cola. In 2005 a framework and 3 year plan was developed to support the implementation and management of virtual teams across agreed areas of the organisation.

Business Issues

Two years on, a set of core competencies for working in a virtual environment had been established, and teams had undergone a series of assessments to establish any gaps. While the outcomes of the assessments were very positive, there were areas that could be improved on. It was also recognised that the business had never invested in developing its leaders’ capability to work in a virtual environment.

The human resources function, in conjunction with a core group of managers who were involved in implementing and managing virtual teams, sought a training programme. The programme needed to help them assess and validate their current virtual team leadership practices and experiences, matching it against global best practice and set action plans to move to the next level of high performance in virtual team working and virtual team management.

Coca-Cola Latin America commissioned Academy Internet to work with them to specify and deliver a bespoke development programme for a small group of virtual team managers.

The Learning Solution

The unique feature of the programme was that it was delivered virtually, the main reasons for which being:

- While the facilitators were based in the UK and France, participants were based across Latin America in Puerto Rico, Brazil and Argentina.
- Participants could engage in a two month development programme without disruption to them continuing to manage “the day job”.
- Participants got to experience life as a virtual learning set team member.
- The programme used up to date tools and technologies to support the development of the learning set and the programme. These technologies were promoted as best practice to virtual team management, so there was learning layered on learning.
The programme itself consisted of a variety of activities and interactions, over a 2 month period. These consisted of:

- A series of 6 online web seminars held over a 2 week period:
  - Setting the scene; introduction to participants, facilitators, the programme, the tools and technologies
  - Effective participation in virtual teams
  - A framework for effective virtual teams
  - Team spirit and motivation
  - Personal skills, coaching and action learning
  - Hands on with Wikis, social networks and survey tools
- Participation in a social network team room
- One to one telephone coaching
- Collaboration tools, including social networks, survey tools and wikis
- Assessments, audits and analysis
- Action learning sets

A follow up to the action learning project was held 6 weeks later.

**Business Benefits**

The design of the programme encouraged participants to take responsibility for defining their own learning requirements. The various survey tools that the training facilitators provided encouraged them to actively reflect on their working environment and current practices.

A common thread from each participant was that they all worked long days and long weeks. Partly this was because they were all passionate about their work and their teams. But partly this came out of some organisational – and national – cultures which were based on a high level of interpersonal, real-time contact. Hence virtual team leaders could be spending as much as 8 or 9 hours a day on the phone.

By investigating alternative asynchronous communication strategies, the team leaders realised that they could free themselves up to work more strategically. This would also help their teams move through the stages of team maturity to becoming more self-sufficient, high performing teams.

**Participant feedback**

As a result of the programme, the participants developed action plans which they will roll out through their divisions over the 18 months following the programme. They had a purpose, a focus, and a direction. Here are two statements from the participants that highlight the shift in thinking and attitudes that took place over the programme:

> “Until now, we’ve been managing the teams with what we have. What we can do as a result of this training is come up with a proposal of what is indispensable to virtual team management. Some things might be small and simple, others are more fundamental. For example, we need good quality headsets; access to blogging tools; shared drives to manage our information and share our knowledge.”

> “Up until now we’ve been experimenting with virtual team leadership. Now it’s time to create a robust framework and provision of resources to underpin what we are doing. It’s not a pilot anymore. It’s what Latin America needs for the future.”
Good practice ideas – hints and tips for effective implementation

- Having two facilitators is essential in case of problems with connections; it also enabled one to use chat to write a real-time synopsis of the sessions, which helped with cross-cultural accents and language differences.

- Make time in the online sessions to enable participants to “do” some of the required preparation and work; the advantage of the participants being able to fit the training around the day job actually meant that they didn’t have time to do much between sessions.

- Don’t expect managers to be fully up to speed with technologies and tools – build in time for them to experiment and use the tools that are available. “I know my grandson uses Facebook – it hadn’t occurred to me that I could use social networking with my team.”

- Don’t over-prepare. Much of the energy and benefit from this programme came from the participants sharing experiences and formulating their own requirements for themselves.

- Don’t try and change the world all at once. One or two well focused actions that are implemented and supported will make a huge difference.