

case study

Creating a Core Skills Programme at Alfred McAlpine

Background

Critical to becoming 'first choice for civil engineering' is going well-beyond traditional customer satisfaction, to establish enduring relationships with local and national government.

This in turn means encouraging everyone in the business to take the extra steps required to turn ordinary service into exceptional service.

In 2004, a review of the extent to which Alfred McAlpine was supporting its Civil Engineering workforce in achieving this revealed some serious shortcomings. There was no structured training in place, no formal budget allocated to develop employees, no personal development plans, or appraisal process, and negative feedback from employees themselves. The annual employee engagement survey found that only 19% of workers thought they got good feedback on how they were doing. A third did not understand the company's objectives or their role in supporting this.

Denise Regan was appointed to the newly created role of Head of Training & Development and tasked with designing a brand new development programme. The challenge was to create and implement a way of developing employees that would align with Civil Engineering's business objectives. This had to measurably improve employees' understanding of corporate objectives and their role in supporting the business in achieving these.

The success of the training was to be measured on three different levels as follows:

Training Quality: Employees were asked to score any training received immediately afterwards, to ensure standards remained high. The challenging target of achieving an overall satisfaction score of 2.5 (on a scale where 0 was poor, 1 Fair, 2 Good and 3 Excellent) was set for this part of the assessment.

Training Relevance: Each and every individual was allocated a line-manager for the first time so that they could meet with them to review their development

needs. Before training both had to agree three aims and objectives that the training was to achieve and review how successful the training had been in meeting the desired goals four to six weeks after each and every training session attended.

Training Impact: To ensure the training was supporting business objectives. A formal appraisal process was put into place to gather feedback on the performance of each and every employee, both before and after the training had taken place. HR collated and reviewed all feedback to monitor the success of the training.

At the overall business level, Alfred McAlpine wanted the training to result in:

- Civil Engineering achieving its profit target for 2005
- Reduction in the Accident Frequency Rate (AFR)

Creating the values

The first step in deciding what the training should cover, involved creating a set of values to embody the behaviour that employees would need to consistently demonstrate if Civil Engineering were to achieve its objectives. After reviewing where the Civil Engineering workforce was currently failing to demonstrate these behaviours, five core training needs emerged:

1. Managing People
2. Negotiating
3. Presenting
4. Business Writing
5. Time Management

Establishing the Core Skills Programme

Alfred McAlpine invited talent management specialists, Getfeedback, to create a 'core skills' programme that would equip employees with the skills needed to live

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the values across each development area. Using its experience of helping companies solve commercial problems by translating them into people problems, Getfeedback created a series of training sessions based on 'real-life' business problems encountered by Civil Engineering employees.

The Business Writing course centred on genuine complaints from members of the public about perceived destruction of trees and a request for compensation for a car damaged by debris left after completion of works.

The Managing People course looked at how to deal with a usually competent worker showing signs of distraction whilst operating dangerous machinery and what action to take against an aggressive site manager threatening violence against workers.

In each case, the courses were carefully designed to equip employees with the fundamental skills needed to handle difficult situations in the interests of both themselves and the performance of the business. The aim was not just to help employees understand the complexities of the particular examples being worked through, but also to provide them with a 'tool-box' of useful information and practical insight to enable them to handle any other situation.

In keeping with Alfred McAlpine's commitment to link training with business needs, the training was run as a modular programme, with line-managers and employees themselves deciding which modules were most relevant to each individual's needs.

Each module, lasting 1-2 days, was delivered at Alfred McAlpine's offices to optimise budget. This also reinforced that it was Alfred McAlpine training, specifically designed to meet the needs of Alfred McAlpine employees. Employees could pick a date from a published training timetable to attend the modules relevant to them.

The training sessions were delivered by Getfeedback's expert trainers and supported by members of the Alfred McAlpine HR department.

Each session consisted of a mixture of theory and role-play. Employees from different projects, doing different roles, were deliberately brought together to encourage cross-learning.

Evaluating the training

All 550 Civil Engineering employees, including support staff, had the option to attend the training. In total 102 people attended at least one of the modules. All employees attending training were given a special form to list the learning objectives they agreed with their manager. The same form was used to rate the quality and relevance of the training immediately after the course. Forms were reviewed by HR and returned to the employee. Four to six weeks later, employees had to meet with their line manager to review the impact of the training on their performance. This was recorded on the form and sent back to HR for final evaluation.

Everyone attending the training rated its quality and relevance as being more than good, with the Presenting and Time Management modules verging on excellent.

The response from employees attending training sessions has been very positive. The overwhelming majority feels that the Business Writing and Time Management development is enabling them to perform more effectively in their role.

Making a difference at every level

Just six months into delivery of the training programme, the next annual employee engagement survey found that the number of employees who think they are being provided with good feedback had increased by a third. Confidence that they had the right skills to do the job had also increased dramatically, to 79%. In total, over three quarters of Civil Engineering employees stated that they were now 'proud' to work for Alfred McAlpine, making this one of the most engaged divisions within the business overall.

Even more importantly, over two thirds of employees are now aware of Alfred McAlpine's objectives, with 84% indicating that they are committed to helping the company achieve them.

Because the modules were designed to improve 'Core Skills', Joanna Smelt, an office administrator, was able to attend exactly the same training as more skilled colleagues. She chose to attend the Time Management course because she was continually struggling with her

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workload. "The course helped me to realise the importance of prioritising tasks and taking responsibility from others," says Joanna.

Oluwole Sonubi, an engineer working on the Dartford Bridge, attended the People Management training to help him set and monitor site objectives in line with overall business objectives, "I really learned a lot about communication and how to get points across on site," says Oluwole. "A lot of what I learned comes down to getting people to plan ahead with the needs of others in mind. Things have been running much more smoothly. Potential problems are now being picked up at the design stage, because there's enough time for proper review before works start and materials get bought."

The Business Impact

By translating business objectives into people values and basing development needs on these, the course has relevance and is accessible to each and every employee. As a result it has exceeded expectations on every front.

Civil Engineering's AFR (Accident Frequency Rate) fell from 0.17 to 0.14 in 2005 and currently stands at 0 three months into 2006.

Financial targets were met, resulting in a 15% overall increase in the profit share/bonus paid to employees who have been with the company for six months. As this bonus is also based on individual, as well as company performance, the fact that 90% of the eligible workforce were entitled to it, is testament to the overall impact of performance improvements.

The training has also greatly enhanced the way Civil Engineering professionals feel about working for Alfred McAlpine. The annual employee engagement survey showed an overall increase of 19%. This outstanding improvement in job satisfaction means Civil Engineering is considered a MORI Top 10 Company when it comes to employee commitment and job satisfaction.

"We saw strong growth and a solid performance results across Civil Engineering. This has had a direct impact on enabling us to successfully achieve our business objectives." Steve Smith, managing director, Alfred McAlpine Civil Engineering