

Southern Water: Increasing productivity and improved Customer Service through behavioural change

Executive summary

Surveys repeatedly show that consultants, while bringing specialist knowledge and project management skills to the projects they work on, are not always successful in transferring their skills to their clients. Trinity Horne's work with Southern Water is an exception to this rule.

Having identified potential improvements in the productivity of Southern's clean and waste water treatment operations, Trinity Horne helped identify and embed the changes in behaviour of Southern's frontline staff which were needed to realise the benefits for customers, staff and the company itself. However, rather than working directly with all the 500 staff involved, Trinity Horne focused on giving a small number of people from Southern Water the skills to coach their own colleagues. The result was a 17% improvement in productivity, improving service delivery for customers and generating operation efficiency.

"There's always a danger, when you get consultants in, that the benefits only last as long as the consultants are on site," says Richard Price, Programme Manager at Southern Water. "Trinity Horne adopted an innovative approach which centred on developing the coaching skills of a small number of our people so that they could go out and coach others. The substantial increases in productivity achieved by this project are the results of the efforts and skills of our staff, but they would not have been possible without Trinity Horne's support."

Background

Southern Water supplies fresh, quality drinking water to more than one million households and treats and recycles wastewater from nearly two million households across Sussex, Kent, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Every day it supplies 555 million litres of drinking water from 90 water treatment works along more than 13,600 kilometres of water mains, and treats and recycles 1,300 million litres of wastewater at 371 treatment works after it is pumped through a sewer network of more than 21,500 kilometres.

Southern Water's clean and waste water operations areas of the business employed around 500 staff – the operators who run the plants and the mechanical, electrical and instrumentation engineers who maintain them, managed by 50 team leaders and ten area managers.

What was the problem / opportunity faced by the client?

At Southern's request, Trinity Horne carried out a short review of current working practices in its water treatment operations, analysing the processes and systems in place and identifying areas where productivity could be improved. "The key conclusion," says Jeremy Kinghorn, who led the project from Trinity Horne's side, "was that Southern's team leaders were spending too little time in the field helping their staff and too much time behind their desks dealing with bureaucracy."

One solution could have been to carry out a large-scale and costly implementation programme, involving an army of consultants for several months, but Trinity Horne had a different proposal. "From the many years of work we've carried out improving organisations' productivity, we recognise that the key to better performance lies in changing the behaviour of front-line managers," says the company's chief executive, Brendan Cahill. "These are the people who typically find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place: they want to take on more responsibility but are held back by the feeling that they have to follow processes slavishly. At the same time, they're frustrated by initiatives coming out of a head office or cascading down from senior managers because they've had no say in them. Consultants can sometimes make a difficult situation even worse, because they come in from the outside, telling people what to do."

"There were a lot of systems and process changes already underway during the first phases of the project," says Richard Price, Southern's Programme Manager but we saw behavioural change as the glue that would knit all these initiatives together. It was essential to achieving the benefits."

TrinityHorne.

To get around this problem, Trinity Horne has developed a programme – Master Coach – which is designed to help team leaders improve the productivity of their staff. Far more than simple training, the programme is part-coaching and part-consulting. Rather than a generic course which people attend, its content is tailored to suit the needs of each organisation and of the individuals involved. “It starts with clarifying people’s objectives and setting them specific targets for what they will achieve as a result of going on the course,” explains Kinghorn. “We then provide a combination of formal training and informal coaching specifically designed to help them achieve those objectives. Finally, when they have returned to their day jobs we continue to mentor and support them.”

“Instead of sending people on a conventional, ‘sheep-dip’ training course, we chose a more bespoke approach, followed by an extended period of support,” Price explains. “The objective was to ensure that the behavioural changes we needed weren’t short-lived: if we were to get the productivity improvements we’d identified, then the change had to be sustainable.”

Another critical aspect of the project was that Trinity Horne was not to change the behaviour of all 500 operational staff in the clean and waste water division, but to train four people, selected by Southern Water, to become Master Coach instructors so that they could coach the Section Leaders who in turn became the Performance Coaches to the field staff. “These people came out of different parts of Southern’s business,” says Roger Badenhorst, another member of the Trinity Horne team. “Some were quite senior, others more junior. Only one came from the HR department so had had previous experience in delivering training.” It was these four people together with two Trinity Horne Consultants people who then coached and mentored Southern Water first and second line managers, as the programme was rolled out across the entire water treatment network.

In order to embed the Master Coach programme more widely and ensure that the operational managers trained in it were given due credit for their achievement, Southern Water and Trinity Horne established a joint panel to accredit the “master coaches” in a formal way. “This was something people had to earn,” explains Badenhorst, “not a badge handed out automatically at the end of the programme. They had to demonstrate a measurable improvement in performance.” It is a point reiterated by Price: “Managers could only submit for accreditation when they’d been all the way through the programme. To earn the accolade, they had to have ticked all three boxes: demonstrating changes in behaviour, how those changes had been sustained, and the quantifiable impact they had had on the bottom line.”

Benefits

A team of 2 people from Trinity Horne worked with Southern Water over a six month period to “train the trainers” and, ultimately, change the behaviour of the water treatment operational staff.

The upshot was a 17% jump in productivity.

“We also helped them develop a tool to measure productivity more effectively,” says Kinghorn. “Previously, the company had relied on bureaucracy – constant checklists and reports – to measure efficiency and that was one of the main reasons why team leaders were spending so much time behind their desks rather than out in the field.” Working closely with Price’s team, Kinghorn and his colleagues, helped shift attention to genuine performance management, using a small number of key metrics, available to all team leaders, to gauge efficiency and to concentrate resources on helping people improve.

Moreover, in the Master Coaches themselves and the approximately 70 front-line managers they have already worked with, Southern now has a pool of people who have a greater appreciation of the skills needed to improve productivity. “They have become highly effective operational managers who will form the core of future improvements,” says Price.

The programme has also opened up new opportunities for those who have been through it. “One of the great benefits that Roger and his colleagues have brought to this process is objectivity,” Price explains. “Because they don’t know the candidates before they review their application pack and interview them, they don’t have any baggage and there is no danger that the candidates will be pigeonholed. Their achievements are allowed to speak for themselves.”

An additional benefit for Southern Water was Trinity Horne's licence model for MasterCoach, which has enabled Southern Water to roll out the methodology into its networks division. Now an additional group of section leaders and staff have been exposed to the process. This required only minimal support from Trinity Horne during the accreditation stage of the process. Richard Price comments if you "give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime."

Since the programme has been in place, this accreditation has been recognised as a Btec Level Three qualification, giving it recognition and currency both inside Southern Water and externally. Trinity Horne continues to work at Southern, judging who deserves to be formally accredited as a Master Coach and auditing the programme of behavioural change.

The key challenge: making change stick

Southern Water was adamant that it was not enough just to identify potential benefits: genuine, bottom-line benefits depended on making sure that people did not revert back to the way they used to work. "Research shows that repetition is the key to create good habits," says Price, "and one of the most innovative aspects of this programme was that it wasn't designed to be a one-off. Because it starts by setting individual goals and finishes with mentoring and support, it ensures that the right behaviour becomes automatic."

Many consulting projects fail to deliver the anticipated benefits because insufficient thought is given to the motivation of the people from the client side who are involved in them. A critical success factor in this project was that the benefits were not confined to the corporate level: individuals who went through the process, especially the Master Coaches, all gained personally. "You could see a real difference in them," Badenhorst recalls. "We were helping instil the information and skills to be better managers. Why did some teams perform better than others? If they could analyse this, then were in a far better position to be able to apply the lessons of the best performing teams elsewhere." Southern's Master Coaches, in particular, still swear by the lessons they got because they showed the value of encouragement and recognition in an operational business where these were not common. "They were surprised by the power of the programme because it wasn't mechanical, as most training courses are," Badenhorst continues. "The process helped build their confidence as much as it raised the bar for Southern as a whole."

The client-consultant relationship

The nature of this project meant that the working relationship between Trinity Horne and Southern could hardly have been closer. The initial review of the water operations was done by a joint team, taking advantage of Trinity Horne's experience in operational improvement elsewhere in the utilities sector and Southern Water's understanding of its own business. The way in which Master Coach programme was tailored to suit Southern's precise needs and rolled out across its business was predicated on the idea that both sides could – and did – collaborate. "Indeed, because Trinity Horne have worked alongside us throughout this project, it's quite difficult to separate their impact from that of our own people," says Price. "We've over-achieved on the benefits, but as a result of a team effort."

"Trinity Horne acted as our conscience," he sums up. "We did most of the work ourselves, but they were on hand to nudge us and question what we were doing from time to time. We made the change, but they helped facilitate it."

Richard Price, Operations Programme Manager, Southern Water