

Developing Leaders at H2 Compliance

About H2 Compliance

H2 Compliance is a Dublin based company which provides representative services, support and consultancy to assist companies to comply with product safety regulations such as REACH, RoHS, WEEE and GHS. The company has a highly qualified core team of personnel (20 in total) in offices in Cork and Dublin, Ireland, the USA and a network of partners and associates in the US, Europe, China and Korea, ensuring excellence in service provision and lasting relationships with clients.

The Challenge

The company had developed its reputation and served its initial client base over the first 4-5 years via the work of the founding partners. Then, as the company developed its growth plans, certain growth challenges became apparent.

1. Developing team leadership and people management skills, as new staff were being hired.
2. Developing improved quality of communication of all staff with customers, so as to increase customer loyalty and open up higher value-add opportunities.

The Coaching Programme Phases

Phase 1: Expansion of the CTO's team.

With an extension of services into the cosmetics business in 2012, the company had hired several technical experts and science graduates.

As coach, I helped the chief technical officer (CTO, also one of the company founders) to develop his skills in leading and coaching a more diverse team, whilst balancing his own role to develop business strategy and give clear technical direction. My approach was a mix of training, mentoring and coaching.

- As a trainer and mentor, I introduced the CTO to models of coaching staff (including the GROW model) to improve performance; I described psychometric concepts (such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) which help explain what makes people different; we covered body language, listening and questioning, all key aspects of communication, which help to build rapport with staff.
- As a coach, we explored how to apply these concepts in ways which would work for the CTO in his interaction with his team, putting them into practice and gaining awareness of what was working or not working; he applied these new skills and learned how to develop greater empathy with his team, to ask more questions and to strike a more effective balance between asking and telling. There were times too when he needed a sounding board, and as coach, I helped him to turn his words into constructive thoughts and effective actions.

Phase 2: Development of the chief toxicologist (2013).

As a technical expert with years of government experience in safety regulation, the chief toxicologist (CT) knew exactly what the regulating bodies required of H2's client companies, before they could label and sell their products safely to the public. His main challenge was to develop a collaborative approach to launch their products on time, given that these companies held widely varying views on the importance and urgency of providing H2 with all of the necessary data in a timely and accurate manner.

We focused on 2 areas for coaching; firstly on productivity and prioritisation of work with multiple parallel projects; secondly on the communication of H2's needs and the processes and timescales involved for launch readiness.

- The CT quickly recognised that customers were at different points along their journey towards full collaboration with H2, and used this knowledge as a key criteria for steering priorities. He also developed strategies for delegating the technical work, setting clear standards for quality and content.
- The CT developed different ways of presenting H2's requirements to customers and different ways of responding to them, particularly so for those who seemed reluctant to adapt to H2's processes. He quickly became aware of how conflict might develop and adapted his communication to deal with this effectively.

Phase 3: Improving customer relationship management (CRM).

The company directors had recognised in 2013 that during the next phase of growth, there would be many opportunities to enhance the content and quality of service to existing customers, in addition to service provision for new customers. They needed to bring the whole team up to the same level of understanding of H2's approach to CRM, and for the team to learn new skills in communication with customers so as to build upon existing and new business relationships.

Working closely with the CEO and his board, we developed a 1 day CRM workshop for the whole team who immersed themselves in discussion groups and communication exercises, including;

- The rationale for a CRM system, its key guiding principles and best industry practice.
- Communication skills – rapport, listening, questioning, and cultural context.
- Skills practice in selling, moments of truth, exploring customer needs collaboratively.
- Business strategy, opportunities, customer segmentation.
- Customer centred culture, recognising and rewarding the right behaviours, handling complaints.
- Taking the journey from new customer to core customer.

Phase 4: Development of sub-team leads (2014).

Looking forward over the next 6-7 years, further growth would need a more effective organisational model, with sub-teams having a customer segment focus, and senior leaders taking a more strategic view of new and more profitable business opportunities.

I coached 2 new team leaders plus 1 technical contributor during the course of the year, covering topics of;

- Wearing 2 hats: leading others while making a significant technical contribution.
- Influencing others inside the company.
- Building relationships with customers and adding greater value.
- Process creation and improvement.
- Personal development and its prioritisation.
- Running effective team meetings.

The Results

Observed benefits for H2

Company growth: The directors recognise the benefits of my coaching as both supporting and enabling growth. This is showing up in terms of the number of new customers and higher levels of value delivered to them.

Staff development: The team leads are demonstrating greater ease and versatility in handling their dual roles of technical leadership and people leadership. They show more balance of direct communication and empathy with customers and colleagues, which in turn enhances their professional relationships and influence. The directors have noted these subtle changes in behaviour which are definitely moving in the right direction.

The team leads are also making strategic inputs into the company's plans and areas of prioritisation.

The individual technical contributors appreciate the necessity for learning and development so as to make a bigger contribution, but the challenge of prioritising this development and of making the appropriate choices and sacrifices is still very much work in progress.

Communications: All staff demonstrate improvements in Customer communications, via the use of more open questions during customer meetings. In turn this has opened up discussion on new service provision and growth.

Learning points for the coach

Working with H2 has given me some amazing insights into my role as coach, and with the help and support of my coach supervisor, the experience has helped me to develop in 2 areas.

1. **System level learning:** Each person in the company, the management structure, the customer segmentation, the reporting relationships etc., plus my own role as coach, are all parts of a system. My opportunity is to recognise the system context of my coaching and to use this knowledge to guide my contracting and coaching agreements, so that I can share my system level observations, without breaching confidentiality with any individuals concerned.
2. **Individual level learning:** My opportunity here is to recognise earlier the need to create greater challenge and to push my coachees out of their own comfort zones, whilst of course balancing my provision of support and encouragement. This was described by Day and Blakey in this year's WBECS session as giving "a loving boot" at the right time, holding the coachee accountable for taking action.

Useful resources

- "Challenging Coaching" by Day and Blakey (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Challenging-Coaching-Traditional-foreword-Whitmore/dp/1904838391>)
- Khalsa and Illig: "Let's get real or let's not play".
- Ellen Gifford: Customer relationship management. <http://www.businessballs.com/crmcustomerrelationshipmanagement.htm>
- Contagious emotions: The value in establishing and maintaining rapport. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG5XEqI4Dfw&feature=youtu.be>
- Eye movements: http://www.blifaloo.com/info/lies_eyes.php
- 8 minutes on body language: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUXtGQkJcQ0&feature=related>