

Improving engagement in a small business

Recruiting and retaining peak performers

BY NICKI HAYES

Today it has become popular to talk about building a strengths-based company. Some large organizations, such as Sony, are known for making this happen. But is it possible in a small business where budgets are tighter? Nicki Hayes examines the engagement techniques behind the meteoric rise of one of the UK's leading search marketing agencies, The Search Works.

Former CEO of The Search Works, Nick Hynes, doesn't believe that staff reward programs and specialist treatment are the most effective methods of engaging staff. Rather, leaders should try breeding a culture of self-managing achievers and then "stoke the fire in their bellies."

The Search Works applied this approach and delivered outstanding results. Starting life called WSPS, it grew from a turnover of £1 million (approximately US\$ 1.98 million) to close to £100 million (US\$ 1.98 million) in 2007 and was sold to TradeDoubler when they bought The IMW Group last year for £56 million (US\$ 110 million).

There were many factors that contributed to its growth – but one was its approach to people, which integrated practical methods for building on people's strengths and developing "super teams".

Recruiting and retaining talent

Original incentives to encourage firms to recruit and retain the best people are becoming the Holy Grail within business consultancy circles. Traditionally, money has done the job, with annual bonuses becoming almost as important as

annual salaries to new recruits. But, this is now seen as old fashioned and has lost its impact within many sectors.

The Search Works is living proof of this. The fastest climber in the annual *Sunday Times* Tech Track 100 league table in 2006 and magazine *New Media Age's* number one UK search agency for three years running, this dynamic company is setting the pace.

Growing its staff by 47 percent in 2007, and from a turnover of £5 million (around US\$ 9.9 million) in 2004 to over £100 million (US\$ 198 million) in 2007, the pace is fast. So fast, that the company was acquired by an astute watcher of the market last year.

The reason for its success, according to Hynes, is the people it recruits. Or, more specifically, its very clear vision of an encouraging internal culture based on recruiting, rewarding and retaining self-managing achievers, and the policies it has in place to achieve this vision.

"Get this right, fill their bellies with fire," claims Hynes, "and the feeling of 'flow' associated with working within such an environment empowers the right individuals to maintain and sustain peak performance and deliver outstanding results."

Furthermore, the sense of fulfilment they gain makes them want to stay, in spite of frequent invitations to join more established players within the search marketing sector.

Translating the vision into reality

The Search Works, together with sister company The Technology Works, used a tried and tested

approach to realize its vision. This approach, called “the strengths way”, provides a framework for organizations, teams and individuals to build on their strengths to achieve their “Picture of Perfection” (POP). Nick had experienced the strengths way when he worked at Air Miles and knew it was what he needed if his POP for The Search Works was to become a reality.

“I discussed our vision with the board very early on. We agreed our continuing success would come down to employing great people with a similarity in spirit and a diversity of skills. We also agreed that if we managed to recruit such people we’d need to do something special to keep them in such a competitive market place,” explains Hynes.

“It wasn’t just about legislating to recruit the right people. It was about supporting them and giving them the environment needed to allow them to excel. It was about creating a culture of shared values where positive self-managing achievers could thrive. The strengths way provides the tools to achieve this, so we brought in specialist, Mike Pegg, to help.”

Pegg pioneered the strengths way of working with people and he’s spent the last 40 years using the approach with individuals, teams and organizations including Microsoft, Sony, Waterstone’s, Trayport and Digital Outlook. (See Figure One on page 30.)

Getting senior leader buy-in

How do you start engineering a strengths culture? According to Pegg, each organization or team is different but there are some standard tools and frameworks you can draw from. At The Search Works, Pegg was involved from very early on, so he started the process with a round of meetings with individual board members who then worked together in a workshop tailored specifically to a board level.

It’s crucial to get buy-in at board level if the process is to work, according to Pegg. This is especially important as issues can arise if experienced business people, who have enjoyed success previously without having such a formal process in place, begin to feel uncomfortable.

“Half the board had never experienced anything like this before yet they were all successful business people in their own rights. Why should they buy into it?” explains Hynes.

“Bringing in what could be perceived as a process may have put people outside their comfort zone and caused problems, but it didn’t. Mike Pegg brings cohesion to even the most disparate group of people by relating to them individually in terms of real and specific benefits that they’ll understand.

Meeting with each board member individually, he was able to appeal to both their hearts and

their heads. So, when I sought their agreement to get him in to run a workshop to help us clarify the type of culture we wanted, they bought in wholeheartedly.”

Developing pictures of perfection

In due course, The Search Works entered the next phase: a series of workshops in which they identified their organizational, team and departmental POPs – what exactly they wanted to achieve, by when and how. These POPs weren’t just about financial goals. They were about values and the type of environment The Search Works needed if they were to live such values and reach their goals.

So, with the board’s ownership and the framework beginning to come together in the form of their POPs, the time had come to live some of the values they espoused. If they wanted to achieve their POPs they needed to share the vision with their staff and give these people the tools they needed to succeed. It was time to introduce the super teams concept.

What are super teams?

Super teams have a compelling purpose and translate this into a clear picture of perfection. (See Figure Two on page 31.)

People know what mountain they’re climbing, why they’re climbing it and when they’ll reach the summit. Super teams are made-up of volunteers, not victims. People proactively opt-in and make their best contribution towards achieving the goals. They do professional work, solve problems and deliver peak performance. Super teams do everything possible to achieve their POP.

Running super team workshops

A series of super team workshops were run at each of The Search Works’ three locations. The purpose was to share the big POP and to facilitate each team developing their own. The workshops ▶



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KEY POINTS

- The fortunes of search marketing agency, The Search Works, were turned around as a result of encouraging a culture of self-managing achievers.
- This was achieved through a method called the strengths way, which included using tools such as pictures of perfection and super teams.
- The company’s turnover grew from £5.3 million (around US\$ 10.5 million) to £100 million (US\$ 198 million) as a result of the strengths process.

“THE KEY TO RECRUITING AND RETAINING THE BEST PEOPLE ISN’T ABOUT MONEY OR STAR TREATMENT. IT’S ABOUT CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE SUCH PEOPLE THRIVE.”

- ◀ provided a framework and practical tools to set up the teams to succeed; to clarify the team’s POPs; to make clear contracts about everybody’s contribution to the POPs; to use everybody’s strengths to ensure superb work and achieve peak performance and to find creative solutions to identified problems.

Nick Hynes was present at each workshop, kicking off by presenting his POP for the organization then asking each individual to write down what they’d like to do to make the POP happen. The workshop then went on to share information and messages about what made super teams special and provide each member with a framework for success.

The workshops were a success. The big POP had been shared and accepted throughout the organization and individuals and teams had been given the tools they needed to make it happen.

Six months down the line, The Search Works

ran two further big super team workshops, though on these occasions team leaders took the pivotal role in each workshop rather than Hynes. The purpose was for each leader and each team to come up with their own POPs and for each team to show their contribution to the POPs. This led to each team clearly identifying their spirit, style, skills fit and skills gaps. Consequently many decisions were made about people. Yes, The Search Works needed people but they only needed the right people. Some went, but many more joined.

Embedding the culture

Up to this point it had been easy to share the vision and follow the path thanks to the leadership of some very strong characters and the dedication of the small but perfectly informed teams. But with staff numbers growing, the time had come to embed the values and culture across the enterprise in terms of induction, recruitment and reward programs. It was time to formalize the purpose and ensure the principles were in place to achieve it. Hynes was aware, however, that this had to be handled sensitively and also that timing was crucial:

“When enterprises start talking about values and outwardly promoting them it’s often a sign that they’re in trouble. But if you get it right – identify and implement the right values at the right time – it can make an enormous impact on the success of your organization.

The work we did following the strengths way ensured that we were already living the values before we formalized them. We explored them and engaged our staff in doing so too, ensuring that they owned them by the time the architects of this way of working had disengaged themselves from day-to-day duties.

A reward program was introduced complete with a values framework that people used when making crucial decisions. But we didn’t introduce these as a token gesture, a gimmick or an afterthought. Rather, as the outcome of a philosophical approach – the strengths approach – that has purposefully been embedded within our culture from day one.”

How the strengths approach revitalized the company

The technique resulted in the following results:

- Named by *New Media Age* as the UK’s number one search agency for third year running.
- Highest climber within Sunday Times Tech Track 100 2006.
- Turnover has grown from £5.3 million in 2004 to over £50 million in 2006 and £100 million in 2007.

Figure One: The main focus points of the strengths approach



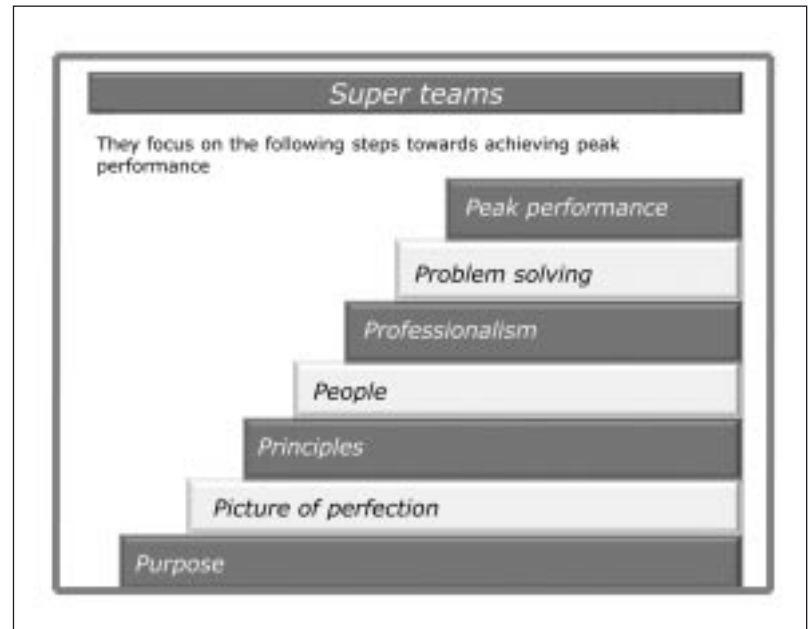
- Employees from its competitors approach The Search Works for jobs.
- All positions are filled quickly.
- Even Google, the market leader, has failed to poach The Search Works staff or to recruit as quickly.

Some final thoughts

The key to recruiting and retaining the best people isn't about money or star treatment. It's about creating an environment where such people thrive and communicating your core values with these people in an engaging and memorable way.

It worked for The Search Works and it will work for any organization genuinely prepared to create such an environment. scm

Figure Two: The steps that should be followed to produce a super team



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