



CASE STUDY: World Café Innovation at Royal Swaziland Sugar Corporation

Client Overview

The RSSC, located in the north-eastern Lowveld, is one of the largest companies in Swaziland. It employs more than 3 000 people and produces two-thirds of the country's sugar, as well as a significant quantity of ethanol. Alan Kirschner, managing director of Customer Diagnostics, has been involved in facilitating the strategic transformation of the RSSC for CEO Nick Jackson since 2009. During this journey, Kirschner has made use of a number of technologies, tools and processes, including Open Space technology, the Achievement Process, World Café and the Competitive Strength report.

The Challenge

In 2013, Customer Diagnostics was invited to help RSSC roll out the company's vision, mission and values, with particular focus on the organisation's three values. HR was looking for a meaningful method of communicating the true meaning of RSSC's values to ensure employees would understand and 'live' them.

Synopsis

The Royal Swaziland Sugar Corporation (RSSC) has chosen a novel approach to ensure all its employees understand - and behave according to - its values. 10% of staff - from cane-cutters to executives - have been equipped as value storytellers and are currently spreading the message to the entire organisation. This follows an innovative World Café workshop, facilitated by Customer Diagnostics, in which participants themselves - rather than only a professional graphic harvester - produced the images that encapsulate the RSSC's three values.

Solution

After discussion with professional graphic harvester Sonja Niederhumer, Kirschner proposed the World Café methodology. The idea was to hold workshops for 10% of RSSC's employees, as it would be a logistical nightmare and too costly to reach all 3 000 of them.

Each of the participants would emerge from the workshops armed with the tools needed to be able to share the story of the values with 10 other people. In this way, the message would spread throughout the organisation. The World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. (Source: www.theworldcafe.com. Visit the website for information about the methodology.)

"The beauty of World Café is that a few people can have intimate conversations within a very large group of people," says Niederhumer, who works with organisations to create real-time images that capture the essence of group workshops and processes. "Honest, sincere conversation tends to emerge as participants don't have to address the entire room." The methodology usually ends up with individuals sharing the results of these intimate discussions with the rest of the large group. Insights are written on cards, which are then clustered into themes on a wall, and participants can see the bigger themes emerge.

Results are also often recorded by creating a visual harvest. "This way, more of the right side of the brain is used and we start to create a visual image that holds the energy of the room," says Niederhumer. "Visuals hold lots of information which is very easy to access. They are also more interesting and engaging than words. We create a big, beautiful picture that shares information in an effective, high-impact manner - making it easier for participants to remember and be able to tell the story to others."

Usually, the World Café methodology mainly involves the left (logical) side of the brain. The graphic harvester is involved, but only on the periphery of the process. Participants do have pens and paper for doodling, but do not create useful information via their drawings.

In the case of RSSC, participants attended the World Café workshops to focus on the organisation's three values: Integrity, Delivery and Respect. Because the delegates were expected to spread the message of the values to the rest of the company, it was even more important that they owned the results - which led to a slightly different design for the RSSC workshops.

“Usually the main output from the groups is words, which get transferred onto cards, making the process very left-brained,” says Niederhumer. “We needed to bring more of the right (creative) side of the brain into the conversation for the RSSC workshops. I’ve been doing much research into how visual work impacts group productivity, thinking and learning. It became clear that if we could get the group engaged in the visual aspect of the process – in actually creating the visuals themselves – they would take more ownership and there would be more energy around the process.”

Kirschner and Niederhumer therefore designed the workshops to be more whole-brained. The room was divided into three, one for each of the values, and tables were colour-coded accordingly. At each table, participants talked about the particular value and were given five minutes to draw it, using one simple symbol. Everyone had to make a contribution – even if this was simply one mark on the drawing. So, for example, Integrity was variously portrayed as the sun (bringing light), scales (balance and fairness) or as a rock or tree (solidity/unchanging). The symbols were then displayed on a wall. “This process encouraged participants to process the information more deeply; to translate it from words into a single, simple, memorable concept holding lots of information,” says Niederhumer.



Results

The workshops managed to turn the conversation into one with which participants personally connected. They succeeded in illustrating what the values meant to the participants as well as the behaviours associated with them.

Feedback from delegates was overwhelmingly positive. They were energised by the process. They enjoyed drawing and found it facilitated understanding. They preferred it to reading – and engaged much more easily with the visuals. “Visuals, which appeal to the right side of the brain, can convey information ‘all in one go’, whereas words are very sequential,” says Niederhumer. “Images are a much more efficient way of presenting lots of information quickly. “Symbols and images also travel across cultures, intellect and educational levels,” she says. “They speak more easily to the entire spectrum of people in an organisation – from highly articulate, educated people to those with basic education.”

This was particularly important for RSSC, where transformation is being achieved via staff engagement and the CEO insists on all levels of the organisation being involved. The design brought more of the right side of the brain into the process, but in a structured manner, as opposed to doodling which is traditionally part of the World Café methodology. The drawings also added a naivety and playfulness to the process, making it comfortable.

By the end of the workshop, participants had simple images, holding lots of information, which they had been intimately involved in creating. They were now ready, armed with the images, storyboard and documents, to go out into the organisation and spread the word. “Over time, each of the delegates will use the graphics to tell the story to ten others; to share the behaviours they need to demonstrate in order to live RSSC’s values,” says Kirschner.

“We’re hoping this will be interactive, so that the story-tellers can get feedback which will feed into more stories or changes to the graphics,” he concludes.

The next step was for participants to tell stories of when they had experienced that value and how it had made them feel. This was also a deviation; it was a story-telling round, rather than the facilitator posing a question to elicit answers. After a round of story-telling, a host stayed behind at the table and the others moved on. The process was repeated. Delegates then had to think about the common themes that emerged about, for example, integrity in action. What did it look like? What were the behaviours? They had to draw the top three behaviours that illustrated that value – one behaviour per card.

“They created very clear, memorable visuals,” says Niederhumer. “They were portraying things they had actually experienced as something concrete and tangible.” The final harvest was a visual drawn by Niederhumer that pulled in everyone’s symbols and common themes. All participants watched it emerge.

“The harvest is a touch point,” she says. “Participants will remember their conversations when they see their symbols.”

