

Case Study by James Anderson-Dixon, Property Services, Nationwide Building Society and John Seymour, John Seymour Associates

An Effective Strategy for Improving Customer Service Excellence with PRIDE at Nationwide

Ultimately, service excellence is a journey and we continue to apply the learning we've gained through the Unisys/Al Towards for the benefit of our members.'

Janice Banks

Head of Member Service - Nationwide Building Society

Overall Service Excellence Award Winners 2002

An Effective Strategy for Improving Customer Service Excellence with PRIDE at Nationwide

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Why Service Excellence matters

Our future at Nationwide depends strategically on PRIDE. The key to implementing PRIDE depends on finding practical ways of improving customer service. In Property Services Department we have been piloting a new approach to this notoriously tricky area. We have achieved significant success and believe this strategy can play an important part in developing service excellence throughout the Business.

New Thinking in Property Services

In 2002 we realised we had hit a ceiling in our service excellence performance and ratings using traditional management approaches. New thinking was called for, but what exactly was the real issue?

What is Service Excellence?

We knew that a big part of the problem was the hard-to-define term, 'service excellence'. It is one of those terms that we all know the general meaning of, but is very hard to define in any specific and useable way. One of the first goals of the project was to clarify what service excellence means in practice.

Learning from our mistakes

We approached some of our internal customers who had rated us lower than average and asked for their help. They agreed to talk to us about exactly what had not worked for them, and crucially, to give us an opportunity put it right.

What are the skills of service excellence?

We also knew that, whatever customer satisfaction is, it takes skill to deliver it. Some people seemed to be naturals at it, while most are merely average. The question became, what are these skills, and how do we improve them? Clearly these were more than the technical and procedural skills required to carry out a specific task. Part of the problem was that there was no shared language and thinking for the skills that seemed to matter most. They were 'soft skills', 'emotional intelligence', or 'relationship skills'. The word our internal customers used the most was 'communication'. In the end, by popular request, we called them 'people skills'.

Phase One: 'People Skills' - a Tailored Training Programme

We approached John Seymour Associates, who are widely acknowledged to be specialists in this area, to co-design and deliver a 'People Skills' training programme, to meet our needs. We decided on an initial two-day programme to be rolled out to about 80 of PSD's 132 employees. The brief was to improve our performance and ratings in customer satisfaction by developing:

- A better understanding of excellent customer service in practice
- A shared language and way of thinking about customer satisfaction
- An improved ability to learn from customers' experience

- A shared set of skills to deliver results: more satisfied customers

The programme focussed on a handful of key skills to improve on (drawn mainly from the field known as NLP). These included:

Goal setting for results

- Clarifying what is important to individual customers
- Improved awareness of customers' body language
- Enhanced ability to see things from the customers' viewpoint
- Mental rehearsal techniques for improving customer service
- Time management

The training was experientially based, which involved learning key skills by practising doing them. Most importantly, during every course we interviewed a 'less-than- satisfied' customer in depth, until delegates understood exactly what they had to do differently to satisfy that customer. There was one day for follow up and review about six weeks after each training course.

The results of 'People Skills' training

Qualitatively, most people felt that the training programme had made a significant difference. The ratings results back this up. Between 2002 and 2003 (the year of the training), we achieved our biggest recorded improvement in service excellence from 63.28% to 76.32% respectively, a gain of 13% over the year. Because there was no other change over this period that could have caused this increase, we believe the training made a significant difference. We were pleased with these results because we were not sure that a two-day training programme, no matter how good, would deliver a significant and measurable improvement in service excellence.

Phase Two: Improving our Thinking

We learned a lot from the 'People Skills' programme. We knew we had some people in the department who were very talented in the skills of managing customer expectations and delivering excellent customer service. We also knew that, like most people who are excellent at a skill, they had great difficulty describing how they do what they do, in a way that enabled others to learn the skill.

Defining Service Excellence

We did pin it down. Service excellence is defined by each customer by their own criteria for the service in focus. The practical application of this ? If you want to know how to provide service excellence, first you have to find out the customer's criteria, then you design your response to match their criteria, making the best use of the resources available to you.

Identifying the skills which are most needed

How exactly do you find out which skills need upgrading and where in the department to keep on improving service excellence? The best strategy we came up with was to use our informal and formal feedback systems (Customer Satisfaction Surveys, etc.) to identify key action areas. Then we needed to find out more about the key skills needed in practice. How did experts deal differently with these key areas, compared to those that are merely average?

Getting the key skills to where they will further improve Customer Satisfaction through Service Excellence

And, how exactly do you deliver this range of different skills to different people? It seemed clear that rolling out generic training would not be the answer to the next stage. Such training could not deliver key skills in the areas that would make the most difference. It seemed that what we needed was a team of performance coaches specialising not just in delivering customer satisfaction but in service excellence. With such a team having the additional benefit of hands-on experience of working in Property Services, we could then deliver key skills to the right places.

A training programme to develop Service Excellence Coaches

We designed a ten-day training programme for 19 volunteers from the earlier 'People Skills' training who wanted to become qualified Service Excellence Coaches. This course also qualified them as Business Practitioners of Applied NLP. On the course they learned how to:

- Identify specific gaps in our service excellence skills
- Identify exemplars of these skills
- Use skilful questioning to find out exactly what these 'models of excellence' were doing differently
- Try out these strategies themselves, until they could get similar results
- Write up these 'models' of service excellence for others
- Coach others in these strategies, until others' results improved
- Become effective all round coaches in service excellence and performance improvements applying the GROW* model used by Personnel & Development

*stands for: Goal, Reality, Options and What I'll do differently

What we learned from the Service Excellence programme

It is a steep learning curve discovering how experts think and behave differently

- And so this programme is probably for volunteers only
- These skills can be deeply satisfying if you want to understand people
- Any expertise can be 'unpacked' into learnable bits

- Anyone who wants to improve on service excellence can do so
- This approach develops a new interest in learning from experience
- We can improve performance by harnessing our own best practice
- We can go outside Nationwide where we need to import expertise
- We can improve recruitment by selecting for the key skills
- We believe this approach can be replicated in any part of Nationwide
- We can provide coaching in service excellence to our supply chain and within Nationwide

Here are three case histories showing the effectiveness of this approach.

Case Study 1

Inspiring Project Performance (JDI Doesn't Work)

Newton Mills and Tony Fowler

Soft skills make the difference

In the past, project management within the construction industry has often been seen as confrontational. ('JDI' as the subtitle suggests!) However, a shift is occurring, from a confrontational to a more collaborative style. Organisations such as MACE recognise that traditional project management, where the project manager directs the whole team, can never be more than partially effective. Technical and process skills are not enough - you need collaborative, soft skills to make the difference and really inspire project performance. To find out more about this approach, Tony Fowler and Newton Mills, PSD, interviewed Steve Anderson, MACE's Project Director. This abstract captures the essence of their findings.

Natural ability is needs

A sound technical base together with certain personal qualities, are pre-requisites for project management within the construction industry. After all, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear! Attributes like thinking ability, memory retention, enthusiasm and the ability to communicate are "must haves". These form the building blocks for developing the all important soft skills which really make the difference.

You need the right attitude

Having the right attitude is as important as capability. It can turn average into excellent performance. It is one of the keys to successful leadership. Excellent project managers will display enthusiasm and passion. Having a positive can-do attitude is infectious. Project managers, who inspire their teams, operate at this level.

You need to be able to motivate

In the context of project leadership, being able to motivate the team sounds rather obvious. Some techniques can be taught - for example, using positive feedback, or setting challenging and stretching targets. Such techniques are part of the standard toolkit for the average project manager. But it is clear from talking with successful practitioners like Steve Anderson, that an understanding of how your own motivation works will help you to motivate others.

It's not just about organisation and planning

Planning and organisational skills are clearly important in this arena, but being prescriptive about doing things in a certain way will not guarantee results. It is better to develop systems and processes that are acceptable to all. How do you manage and organise a “prima donna” within a team? Where should project meetings be held? Strategies for coping with these and other organisational issues can be found in the lull article.

So how do you instil the spirit of teamwork and collaboration?

Instilling responsibility in the team to try to achieve the collective objective is at the heart of the “inspirational” approach. Certain skills, techniques and personal tips have helped Steve Anderson over the years. What comes over loud and clear, is the importance of

underlying beliefs, values and behaviours which really do help to drive excellent performance.

‘MACE is a wholly independent professional consultancy providing leading edge management services to the property and construction sectors.

Case Study 2

Valuing Team Diversity

Debbie Shopland and Peter Muller

Highlighting the benefits

Debbie Shopland and Peter Muller, PSD, set out to model ‘Valuing Team Diversity’.

Following a Lead from one of our suppliers, Initial Style Conferences, Debbie and Peter

contacted an organisation called Mission Performance.

Mission Performance is a niche leadership development organisation. They specialise in researching how high performing teams involved in challenges such as polar and ocean racing behave. What is learnt can then be transferred to corporate leaders and teams.

Initially, Debbie and Peter interviewed a professional BT Global Challenge Skipper who had transformed a team of 16 amateurs from all walks of life into a high performing crew. This was achieved by developing a number of strategies to encourage crew members to value team diversity. From this research they were able to highlight various benefits derived from valuing team diversity.

What we teamed and its relevance to PSD

- Improved teamwork both within and between teams in PSD, is seen as an enabler for improving efficiency, customer service and ultimately, employee morale.
- A happy team, where morale is high, is far more productive.
- A key way to improve morale is to encourage the team and every individual of that team to contribute toward individual and collective goal setting. Involvement at this level is both empowering and extremely successful.
- Diversity both within and between teams is sometimes seen as a barrier rather than as an opportunity to improve team performance. It's OK to view diversity as challenging so long as you always believe it also brings opportunity.
- Of particular interest was how to identify and use diversity within teams as an asset. Then how to get teams to value and recognise their own diversity and to draw on it themselves.
- As a leader, there are certain positive attitudes that need to be adopted to build a strong and successful team. These include being calm, supportive and encouraging. Highly developed listening skills are also important.
- In building diversity, it is essential to encourage teams to think differently. Team thinking must move away from 'what do I want to do' to 'where can I give my best'. Teams need to be encouraged to stop thinking about the 'here and now' and to focus on 'how are we going to get there!' Picturing the end result - achieving the team goal - is crucial. Changing the focus from not only 'picturing' the end result but to also 'feeling' it is vital.

Conclusions

Experience shows there are great benefits to be gained from valuing diversity. All teams have the potential to develop into high performing teams if they focus on this. Also, the strength of the leader is crucial in developing the team.

Arguably, some may be 'born' leaders. However, leadership, much of which is intuitive, can be learned and applied by anyone with a desire to learn this skill.

Case Study 3

Positive Mental Attitude in the Face of Adversity

Lynne Keech and Mark Skinner

Introduction

PICTURE THIS. You are standing in a room. Everyone you meet wants to moan about something. All you want to do is put your fingers in your ears and shout "bla ba bla can't hear you". Sounds all too familiar, doesn't it?

Why is it then that some people can deal with this better than others? What makes them so different to you? An unexplained phenomenon perhaps?

I don't think so - want to know more...

One of our contractor's employees acts as a liaison between his organisation and the many sub-contractors down the line. He regularly has to deal with project related problems, uncertainties and deadlines. Often things go wrong which are beyond his direct control - who is ultimately responsible?

Having a 'positive mental attitude in the face of adversity' is a skill we all wish we could possess. Mark Skinner & Lynne Keech from PSD attempted to replicate or 'model' this skill.

The goal was to learn what the contractor's employee does that makes the difference and to pass that skill on to others via coaching.

What we found

The modellee (person being 'modelled') is never off-hand, rude, or aggressive and is able to get the job done because he believes people respond better to you if you have a happy and calm disposition. He believes being negative will not get the results you are looking for, concluding that 'ultimately, courtesy costs nothing... why make waves and be dysfunctional. You have to remember that there is always an alternative - a solution - to any given problem.'

He always tries to recite to himself "It only takes a little extra effort to get it right, but a lifetime of effort putting it right".

It is worth having this skill because the end result is achieved with less stress, which is good for everyone.

You need to start by believing this skill will achieve the best result for everyone. And don't automatically think that it only affects those directly involved with the situation; even your friends and family will benefit! You will find that focussing on the desired outcome will ensure a less stressful situation for all.

Useful strategies for maintaining a positive mental attitude in the face of adversity It's helpful to visualise the happy, smiling face of your client. Try visualising his / her smiling face...perhaps writing a cheque out with your name on it! Also, visualising the happy smiling face of someone close to you, maybe a partner, child or close friend, helps. See difficult situations as a challenge that can be overcome and deal with it in a positive manner. State of mind is important in ensuring you stay on track; staying positive, relaxed and happy will help.

Try and visualise the end result. Perhaps a completed building or a satisfied customer looking at the end-product; even smiling and shaking your hand! Tell yourself "I must exceed my customer's expectations". You need to feel in control and approachable.

A technique used by someone who is good at this skill is to visualise being a lion-tamer in a circus ring. Another is to believe other people see you as being positive. Reassure yourself by thinking that people look up to you because you are so positive.

List of specific Service Excellence Skills available for coaching

1. Inspiring Project Performance

Newton Mills and Tony Fowler

2. Valuing Team Diversity

Debbie Shopland and Peter Muller

3. Positive Mental Attitude in the Face of Adversity

Lynne Keech and Mark Skinner

4. Friendliness

Tim Pidgeon

5. Building an Understanding Into Communication

Jan Corry and Andrew Brown

Communicating Effectively to a Target Audience

Kevin Hornbuckle and Kelly Bezer

7. Motivated by Enthusiasm

Robert Grist

8. Obstructive team members and how to deal with them

Karen Clutson

Next Steps - Implementation within PSD

We are now putting together a programme to implement coaching widely across PSD. This will compliment the current corporate focus on coaching. The general idea isn't to take responsibility for coaching away from managers but to provide an additional resource that can release managers to focus on their job. Also, the team of Service Excellence Coaches will mean that our colleagues can be coached by someone outside of their immediate team, which many view as a real benefit.

Application to Nationwide

We have responded to the challenge of implementing PRIDE. We believe we have piloted an effective strategy for identifying and replicating the core skills of service excellence necessary to improve performance. Furthermore, we think that what we have discovered can be of use throughout our supply chain as well as within Nationwide. This will help all of us to achieve PRIDE, our strategic priority.

Resources available to you

- Book coaching sessions with a skilled service excellence coach
- Choose any of the service excellence skills listed
- Have coaching sessions tailored to your individual needs
- Read copies of our existing research on key service excellence skills
- Request new research on an important service excellence skill
- Discuss the possibility of training your own service excellence coaches

Contact James Anderson-Dixon for any of the above on 01793 652682 or james.anderson-dixon@nationwide.co.uk

About John Seymour and James Anderson-Dixon

John Seymour is an internationally renowned trainer and best selling author (Introducing MLP, Training with NH', Peak Performance through NLP, Successful Managers Handbook). In 1985 he founded JSA, the longest established UK training provider in the area of NLP and soft skills.

James Anderson-Dixon works In Property Services as Best Practice and Supply Chain Manager. He is a qualified trainer of NLP and has a keen interest in the integration of applied NLP into the working environment. He is currently undertaking an MSc in NLP and Organisation Development through the International Management Centres Association. For further information visit theperformance.com or contact Sally Vanson, Course Director on 01249 700290.

Case Study I

INSPIRING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

SOFT SKILLS THAT DELIVER HARD RESULTS

Tony Fowler and Newton Mills

Research and Modelling Project for NLP Practitioner Certification

This write up of the original research project was edited by James Anderson-Dixon and John Seymour

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU DO...

Time was when project management within the construction industry was an aggressive 'Just Do It' environment. Not any more! We live in an age where the way in which a project is delivered

and its emotional impact is considered just as important as what is delivered. Attitudes are changing.

Organisations such as MACE have long recognised that traditional project management, where the project manager directs the whole team, can only ever be partially effective. In fact, technical and process skills alone are now almost taken for granted by clients and customers. Instead, the key to project success is on collaborative, soft skills to effectively manage the needs of clients and customers.

To find out more about this, Tony Fowler and Newton Mills, Nationwide Building

Society Property Services Department (PSD), interviewed Steve Anderson, MACE

Project Director, using basic NLP modelling techniques to find out what MACE do

that makes the difference.

WHAT WE DID

MACE has an enviable reputation within the construction industry and we already knew from our own experiences that they were excellent project managers. But the technical aspects of project management are already well understood — so what is it that MACE does that gives them the edge?

To find out more, we approached Steve Anderson, MACE's Project Director, who agreed to meet with us. Our aim was to interview Steve Anderson in a way that would enable us to tease out what MACE do differently in sufficient detail to replicate it.

Before meeting with Steve, we prepared a number of simple but searching questions. These were designed to explore the types of behaviour, beliefs, values, thinking processes and emotional states that, in Steve's experience, he considered were essential to inspirational project management.

To help keep the session on track, we decided to start with a simple, open question "What is different about MACE?" This and subsequent questions were designed to explore Steve Anderson's beliefs about project management, the way in which project management is carried out and the underlying strategies that support how project management is done MACE style.

To make the most of our time with Steve, we decided to record the interview to free each of us to focus on different areas. This had the advantage of enabling us to concentrate on asking and sequencing the right questions rather than also having to capture the detail of the interview.

WHAT WE FOUND

Steve gave us 90 minutes of his time. This was sufficient for us to capture important business knowledge about what Steve would expect to see and hear from a good, inspirational project manager:

Environmental factors are important

“The best place to inspire people and hold project meetings is on neutral territory or in a project specific area.”

In other words, not in your office or anybody else’s. Meetings should have project goals identity, not a company identity. This is particularly important if the meeting is to build the team.

Key Learning: only “play at home” if there is something formal to be done, or a key decision to be made, or when there is absolute certainty as to what has to be done.

Enthusiasm and passion is essential

It “can turn an average performance into excellence.”

It is clearly one of the keys to successful leadership. The following characteristics are invariably observable in excellent project managers:

- Emphasis on the positive. Having the right can-do attitude, avoiding negativity, really helps to inspire excellent performance. It is as important as capability.
- The ability to get into the right frame of mind and be at your best. Inspiring people know how to do this.

Key Learning: find out what your motivational triggers are. In Steve’s case he envisions a successful, inspiring project and how that would make him feel.

A collaborative working style

“If you adopt an isolationist approach, I cannot see how you can be anything more than average.”

The ability to organise and plan is clearly important to anyone in a leadership or management role. Instilling responsibility in the team to achieve the collective objective is at the heart of the MACE ethos. In the interview, the following skills / techniques / tips stood out like beacons:

- At early meetings, encourage the development of processes that work for all. “Prima Donnas” or other high profile players may have to be encouraged to fall in line. Understand that virtually everyone involved in a project wants it to succeed. The skill lies in getting the buy-in of the whole team.

Key Learning: engage with everyone — it’s easier, better and more enjoyable this way.

- Understanding the fundamental business driver(s) behind a project is of crucial importance. Very often the real driver behind a project will not be apparent in the contract documentation. Asking the client (if necessary) and then getting the whole team to understand the key driver is vital.

Key Learning: knowing what is really important to the client should be behind all key decisions that are made.

- A “socialist” (collective) state of mind is fundamental to the team ethos espoused by MACE. You cannot adopt an isolationist approach and get good results.

Key Learning: you have to realise that no one has all the answers, but that collectively you can find most of them.

- The inspiring project manager tries not to be too directive or too condescending. He needs the collective expertise of the whole team because he can't hope to know it all himself. Respecting, acknowledging and using the collective expertise within the team can be so important to a successful project.

Key Learning: reach out to the team and be approachable yourself

Beliefs and Values “The end product is tangible, physical and visible — a legacy for us all.”

Steve Anderson's key beliefs are very positive and provide him with a strong sense of purpose and motivation. He feels privileged to have an important role which contributes to the renovation and improvement of the built environment.

Key Learning: the underlying motivation for Steve is the importance and ‘philanthropic’ nature (for the benefit of all) of what he is doing.

Raising the game

“You have to plan to beat the programme to even make it . . . I like to come away from the first meeting with everybody thinking they will have to raise their game.”

At early meetings, set challenging and stretching targets. Make all parties realise they have to raise their game. Get people thinking this project is different and special. The initial performance standards or requirements set the scene for the whole project. Some motivation techniques can be taught. The techniques described below are used by Steve and are inherent in his make-up:

- Realise that people are usually responsible for 60% of a project's costs — influencing and motivating people is, therefore, one of the keys to the success of any project.
- As a construction project manager, Steve sees the role he plays as being important and, therefore, it needs to be done well. Caring for the built environment is an underlying principle as far as he is concerned. The physical side of project management — the fact you leave something behind, a legacy, is also important. It's more than just a job. Successful people usually have core values and beliefs which keep them highly motivated

Key Learning: Concentrate on the big picture and not just on profit today. It is getting the whole result that is important. If it's all about money, then performance will not happen.

Thinking Processes and Strategies

“If you want a project to perform, then you need to engage with all the animals in the food chain.”

What thinking processes and mental images occupy the inspirational project manager? What feelings keep him going?

Thinking about the team and client needs are predominant factors:

Belief and respect for people form a strong part of MACE's culture. The realisation that no one person has all the answers, but that collectively, the team can help you find most of them.

Key Learning: virtually everyone involved wants to make a positive contribution to a project

— it is this spirit that needs to be harnessed.

“There are all sorts of things the team may do differently if only they understand why.”

- The understanding of the team is a critical success factor. Specifically, they need to be very clear about the fundamental business driver(s) behind a project. Very often the real driver behind a project, the customer's criteria, will not be apparent — it will not be in the written contract!
- Peer pressure to get the job right is also an important factor.

Kei Learning: thinking about what the client really wants, their criteria, and getting the whole team to understand what matters to the client, is vital.

Emotional State

“you have to have a positive, can-do attitude and avoid negativity whenever possible”

How does an inspirational project manager get into the right frame of mind to operate successfully? What mood or identity does he try to adopt or instil in others?

- Steve is at his best when he has a solution or an idea to sell. Having technical solutions inspires him. Then he in turn can inspire others.
- If for any reason Steve needs to change his emotional state, he either physically or mentally removes himself by looking at a picture, or remembers a really successful project.

Key Learning: Be positive, manage your own emotional state, find out what motivates you and use this to inspire others.

Coping strategies: to get results you need influence others — if this fails get team members to help — if this doesn't work then revert to a more directive style.

INSPIRING PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

We did nail Steve on what leads to inspiring project performance; starting with a sound technical base, motivation, a positive set of beliefs and values, a flexible range of thinking strategies and behavioural skills which together enable them to produce outstanding results. This is cemented by experience and supported by good processes.

We believe that anyone who wants to learn how to 'raise their game' in project management, can now do so. Some of these skills will make a real difference, but which ones, and how exactly, will be as individual as you are. We have found these skills useful ourselves, and are happy to offer

specialised coaching to others. Please contact James Anderson-Dixon, Tony Fowler or Newton Mills

Inspiring Project Performance vs I 030904

Case Study 2

Discovering the skills for optimising team performance

“Leadership, much of which is intuitive, can be learned and applied by anyone with a desire to learn this skill” Debbie Shopland and Peter Muller

This summary, by James Anderson-Dixon and John Seymour, is an extract from a modelling project entitled ‘Valuing Team Diversity’ by Debbie Shopland and Peter Muller, PSI).

Teams vary

Most work gets done by teams of people, yet team performance and satisfaction vary enormously. Take a moment to think of the most enjoyable and satisfying team of people that you have had the privilege to belong to. Allow yourself time to re-experience ‘the buzz’. Great, wasn’t it? Now compare this with your worst experience of a dysfunctional team... Enough said!

Why?

What causes these differences? What exactly is the invisible but magical thing that naturally gifted team leaders do to develop teams? Where would you find

one of these paragons? And how do you discover the secrets of how they do their magic? ‘Magic’ only in Arthur C. Clarke’s sense of ‘any technology we do not yet fully understand’.

The (Re)Search

Debbie Shopland and Peter Muller followed up a lead from one of our suppliers, Initial Style Conferences, and contacted an outfit called Mission Performance.

Mission Performance is a niche leadership development organisation. They specialise in researching how high performing teams involved in challenges such as polar and ocean racing behave. What is learnt can then be transferred to corporate leaders and teams.

Initially, Debbie and Peter interviewed a professional BT Global Challenge Skipper who had transformed a team of 16 amateurs from all walks of life into a high performing crew. They used NLP research and modelling skills to build a detailed picture of exactly how the skipper regularly created truly high performing teams from a group of diverse individuals.

Developing the skills for optimising team performance vs 1 030904

The Three Main Skills

What they discovered was a rich and complex set of skills which the skipper uses at different times and in different ways. To try and make sense of what he does at a very simple level, the first thing

to understand is that his skills of self-awareness and self-management were unusually well developed. Broadly, he goes through three stages in developing a team:

First, he establishes and maintains good relationships with all the team members, and involves them fully in setting goals.

Second, the skipper identifies precisely the strengths and weaknesses of individuals. This ability to recognise the diversity of strengths (and weaknesses) within the team seems to be a central skill. He then builds performance through recognising and reinforcing these strengths in action, until the team learn how to enjoy working together using each other's strengths.

The final stage is teaching them to recognise strengths and diversity in each other, so that they learn to improve their performance further.

To give you a taste, here are a few examples from Debbie and Peter's summary of some of the main beliefs, emotional states and thinking strategies that this world class team leader uses to produce outstanding results. Try imagining each of these examples being true for you as you read them.

What you believe

Belief in the following possibilities and principles is an important starting position for success in this competence:

- A happy team, where morale is high, is far more productive.
- A key way to improve morale is to encourage the team and every individual of that team to contribute toward individual and collective goal setting. Involvement at this level is both empowering and extremely successful.

Diversity can help build stronger teams that are then happier, more productive and customer focussed.

- Everyone has a positive contribution to make and that your role is to identify what that is and then to value it.

- Nothing will happen unless you set yourself goals, and goals within goals, as drivers of performance improvement.
- You may need evidence of success to kick start your own beliefs in the possibilities. Try and make some "quick hits" to fuel this.
- You are flexible enough to adopt different styles as the needs of the team change and their competence builds.

How you feel

- How you feel has a big influence in how effective you are in working with your team.

- An open mind and a feeling of calmness help enhance the listening and observational skills essential to recognise and value the different strengths and contributions both within and between teams.
- Try and generate a “buzz” by sharing with the team your excitement in their successes.
- Build your emotional resilience particularly when under stress and when outputs and “task” seem to be dominating the agenda. Encourage team based solutions without relying on a few trusty crew members to “bail you out”.
- Learn to notice as soon as you need support yourself. Turn to a mentor or a friend as a source of advice and to help you rebuild your confidence, focus and positive mindset.

How you think

- Invest the time in building a shared team vision that reflects and aligns individual’s objectives and goals.
- Involve the team fully in setting the rolling goals to ensure ownership.
- By valuing individuals contributions and particularly their strengths change the team’s thinking from “what would I like to do” to “where can I give my best”.
- Keep looking for opportunities to reinforce your appreciation, within the group environment, of individual’s contributions in their specialist roles.
- Set new goals to maintain progress and interest which should include “stars” in different competencies coaching their colleagues.
- Don’t let yourself get “stuck in the weeds”. Keep your focus on what success looks like, how you are going to get there, and above all, how it will feel.
- Don’t be afraid of relying on your intuition to make decisions — particularly if you have experienced previous success.
- Ask yourself whether different skill sets are starting to be recognised and valued within the team itself.

Practical application to PSD

It is generally accepted within PSD that diversity between different teams and sometimes within individual teams can serve as a barrier to improving our collective performance. This can have an adverse impact on efficiency, customer service and employee morale.

if you can recognise this situation in your own, or in other teams, would you be interested in strategies that will enable you to channel existing diversity in a more positive way?

If you are, contact James Anderson-Dixon, Debbie Shopland or Peter Muller.

Developing the skills for optimising team performance vs 1 030904

Case Study 3

This summary is written by James Anderson-Dixon and John Seymour based on Lynne and Mark's original research paper.

How to Maintain a Positive Mental Attitude in the Face of Adversity Lynne Keech and Mark Skinner

Coping with adversity

Imagine this. You are standing in a room. Everyone you meet wants to moan about something. All you want to do is block it out by putting your fingers in your ears and shouting "Bla bla. I can't hear you". Sounds all too familiar, doesn't it?

Why is it that some people can deal with adversity better than others? What makes them so different to you? An unexplained phenomenon perhaps? We don't think so.

We set out to find out how exactly some people are much better at maintaining a positive attitude when things get difficult. We wanted to improve our abilities at this skill. Would you like to improve yours?

Research

We set out to find the most naturally gifted person we could, who has these skills. It turned out to be one of our contractor's employees, who acts as a liaison between his organisation and the many sub-contractors down the line. He regularly has to deal with project related problems, uncertainties and deadlines. Often things go wrong which are beyond his direct control, but for which he is ultimately responsible? A classic recipe for stress, you might think, but our 'star' thrives on it and gets calmer when things get more stressful.

We believe that having a positive mental attitude in the face of adversity is a quality that everyone would like more of. Our goal was to learn what the contractor's employee does that makes the difference, and to pass that skill on to others via coaching.

We carried out this research by interviewing our star, using questions designed to tease out the specific skills we were after.

What we found

Our 'star' remains calm and positive under pressure. This is what you see on the outside and this is what he feels on the inside. He is never off-hand, rude, or aggressive, and is very good at his job.

How exactly does he do this? Two main areas stood out. His beliefs, and his strategies for maintaining his emotional state. Together, these enabled him to use his mind very flexibly and creatively to find practical solutions to all the problems he faces. He knows when he is on track by constantly paying attention to his own emotional state and the behaviour of the person, or people, he is with. His primary goal is to achieve a perfect result for everyone, and a happy client!

Beliefs

Here are some of the key beliefs he uses to maintain his positive attitude:

- Every situation is a challenge, and viewing it that way makes him deal with things more positively.
- He is a calm and positive person
- Being calm enables him to do his job better
- Staying positive is the only way to achieve the outcome that is best for everyone
- Being calm and courteous earns him the respect of others
- Staying positive reduces stress and takes the sting out of difficult situations
- It has unexpected spin off benefits at home

Thinking Strategies

Here are a few examples of the thinking habits he uses to maintain his calm and positive state. We have tried these strategies ourselves, and got positive results.

- He frequently visualises the smiling faces of loved ones and friends. This directly helps to keep him feeling positive.
- He visualises his client smiling and looking happy, sometimes even writing out a cheque with his name on it! This keeps him focussed on the end goal and feeling positive.
- His internal self-talk is always positive and supportive to help him achieve his goals for everyone. For example, he says things like “It only takes a little extra effort to get it right, but a lifetime of effort putting it right” and “There is always an alternative - a solution - to any given problem.”
- His self talk seems to have two main strands. The first monitors and maintains his normal emotional state of being calm and happy. The second focuses on how to exceed the customer’s expectations. Either of these can trigger the positive images mentioned above, which, in turn, makes his state more positive.

Blocking strategy

Mental strategies work best when you get the sequence of steps right. Here is one he calls his ‘blocking strategy’. This is the name he gives to how he deals with anything that threatens his normally positive state. Like many of his skills, this was fairly unconscious until we probed further. These are the detailed mental steps he took naturally. Try imagining yourself doing this as you read it:

- Notice when any negative thought or voice starts to influence your positive state of mind.

- Say to yourself firmly, “You cannot enter.”
- Then say, in a gentle singing tone, “I am positive.”
- Recall bright, full size, still pictures of each of the people you care about, looking happy. This includes loved ones, friends, clients, etc. Notice how your state begins to change as you focus on each of these images.
- As you do this, say to yourself in a firm and sure voice, “I am controlled.” Then, “I am the repelling force of a magnet.”
- Simultaneously you imagine a huge, red and silver magnet repelling the negative thoughts and blowing them away in slow motion, like dandelion seeds in the wind.
- This leads to a growing warm feeling spreading out through your body, as you notice your pulse slowing, and a feeling of calmness growing.
- As you become aware of this you say to yourself in a slow and reassured voice, “Nothing can change me now. - I am positive and calm.”

In practice, to get this strategy, or any of the others to work you would probably have to tailor the steps to suit your personal style. For example, what would have to be in your ‘self talk’, and ‘images’, to get the same emotional effect? This is where skilled coaching comes in. Also, you would have to practice it many times a day, for perhaps a week for it to become an automatic habit. A habitual strategy is effortless because it runs automatically whenever it is needed. This is payoff!

Practical Application to PSD

We all have our share of pressure to cope with. We believe these skills, which we have modelled in detail, can be tailored to help anyone who wants to deal more easily with the stress of adversity and stay calm and effective under pressure.

Can you imagine the benefits in your life of maintaining a positive mental attitude more easily and more often?

Can you imagine the cumulative effect on morale and performance in PSD if only 10% of us boosted our skills in this area?

If you are interested in coaching, please ask James Anderson-Dixon, Lynne Keech, or Mark Skinner.