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Client Story

Building Trust and Improving Performance at WD-40 Company

For Garry Ridge, CEO of WD-40 Company, it’s all about the people. Ask him about corporate initiatives, profits, or day-to-day operations and he will immediately make the link between people and success. For more than 10 years, Garry and his team—referred to as tribe members—have worked hard to create a trusting, purposeful work environment where everyone can thrive.

WD-40 Company is a global marketing organization headquartered in San Diego, California, where the original WD-40® Multi-Use Product was invented over 60 years ago. Probably best known for the signature blue and yellow can that is instantly recognized worldwide, WD-40 Company encompasses a group of brands featuring a full range of maintenance, specialty, and cleaning products for all corners of the industrial realm, enthusiasts, hobbyists, and home. The brands represent truly trusted and valued products that reflect a corporate environment based on trusting relationships.



Garry Ridge

Creating trust

Trust is created at WD-40 with two things—a culture where people feel safe and a process that ensures a clear understanding of expectations. “We create a safe environment by focusing on care, candor, accountability, and responsibility,” explains Garry. “We expect tribe leaders to care about their people, to be candid with them, and to hold them accountable and responsible. In order to do that, tribe leaders and tribe members have to work together to set goals and define what good performance looks like.”

Two training programs from Blanchard®, Building Trust and SLII®, play key roles in helping WD-40 establish this invigorating, empowered work environment. These two programs provide a common language individuals can use to improve the level of trust in relationships and the quality of conversations about performance. The programs also support the tribal mentality that is such an important part of the WD-40 culture.

Building Trust uses a simple yet powerful framework for creating and sustaining trustful relationships. People learn the importance of being Able—demonstrating competence, Believable—acting with integrity, Connected—caring about others, and Dependable—honoring commitments.

SLII® teaches leaders how to set clear goals with their direct reports, deliver an appropriate leadership style to meet each individual's needs, and give feedback along the way.

When Garry started the journey of creating the culture at WD-40, he knew he needed a way to communicate culture. The term team member failed to capture his desired level of trust and commitment, so he chose the term tribe member. He understood that a team is something you play on once in awhile but a tribe represents a place you belong. A tribal culture is built on open communication where tribe leaders share knowledge with younger tribe members.

“The number one responsibility of the WD-40 tribe is to share knowledge and encourage ongoing learning,” Garry explains. “As leaders, we should get up every day with the pure desire to help people step into the best possible version of themselves.”

At the center of this process is a business philosophy Garry developed called Don't Mark My Paper, Help Me Get an A. Once goals are set, it is the responsibility of the tribe leader to act as coach, taking away roadblocks and barriers to help the tribe member achieve the desired results. “SLII® gives us a non-confrontational language to use. It helps us understand each situation and the leadership style that will meet the tribe member where they are with a particular task or project. And the Building Trust program helps us maintain a safe environment where people know that their leaders mean them no harm. The two programs work together seamlessly to improve communication, productivity, and morale throughout the organization.”

For example, people don't make mistakes at WD-40. They have learning moments, which are the positive or negative outcomes of any situation. These outcomes are shared freely because positive results need to be celebrated and negative results provide an opportunity to learn what changes should be made in the future. “Having a clear purpose, a set of values that provide a safe working environment, and a common language of leadership makes learning moments something to cherish—not something to fear. Some of our most powerful learnings have come from negative situations. Our tribe members understand the importance of sharing information for the greater good,” says Garry.

What about results?

One thing Garry wants other leaders to understand is that a learning initiative like this doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. “This isn't a bargain deal. You don't buy leadership on sale. You have to take the time and make the investment,” says Garry.

7KH LQYHVWPHQW FHUWDLQO\ KDV SDLG R company's employee engagement scores are at a high of 93 percent globally and 97 percent of tribe members say they love—not like, love—to tell people where they work. What's more, 96 percent are excited about the future and 99 percent say their values are totally aligned with the FRPSDQ\ V YDOXH V 2Q WKH tQDQFLDO VLG 40 stock price has increased 41 percent in the last year. In the last 10 years the company has had a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) in total shareholder return of 16 percent per year.

“Not bad for a company that just sells oil, right?” says Garry. “But we do more than sell oil—we get up every day to solve problems and create opportunities. And we do that by creating an organization where people feel safe and know they are contributing to a purpose greater than themselves. Our people are happy about the future.”

Other learnings along the way

Garry’s learning journey brought him a few aha moments he hadn’t expected. “I knew micro-management as a leadership style was not effective and not scalable. I’ve always believed the main job of a leader is to be a coach.” Garry understood that leaders who were promoted into their roles because they were high individual achievers seldom had leadership skills needed to be effective in their new position. He realized he needed to offer training to give these people the tools to be effective leaders.

“The training programs we use from Blanchard are easy for people to understand and apply—but the simplicity of the concepts doesn’t take away from their effectiveness. Our tribe members around the world know this training is not about redirecting undesired behaviors. It’s about developing skills. The programs provide leaders with the tools and skills they need to help their tribe members perform at the highest level possible. And when I hear people say they are using what they have learned at home with their children, I know we have made a difference in people’s lives.”

Garry wants leaders at WD-40 to operate with the understanding that they are there not to protect their own positions, but to develop the people around them to be the best they can be. This is servant leadership in its purest form. Tribe leaders know that if they serve their people, their people will serve their customers, and that will keep shareholders happy—which completes the circle of success at WD-40 Company.”



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