

Bristan Group: an innovative, people centred company developing the full potential of its people and using their skills and knowledge to improve the business

What does this case study illustrate?

The appointment of Jeremy Ling as CEO has strengthened the empowerment of line managers, teams and frontline workers, introducing a culture of continuous improvement that has since become embedded throughout the company. High levels of engagement reflect a culture of trust and leadership values reflected in day-to-day management behaviour. Learning and development of employees at all levels is a high priority.

Workplace innovation elements: self-organised teams, learning and development, continuous improvement, representative participation, empowering leadership, a trust-based culture.

Context

Bristan was founded in 1977 in Birmingham (UK) as a family owned business. It is now a leading supplier of showers, taps and bathrooms in the UK with exports to Europe and Russia. It has been named as One Star status in the *Sunday Times Top 100 Best Companies To Work For*.

The Bristan Group consists of four Divisions: Bristan Trade, Bristan Retail, Heritage Bathrooms, and Bristan Commercial based in the English Midlands. The Bristan Group is part of Masco, a US-based global leader in home products. Masco is a group of companies, each of which operates autonomously. According to Jeremy Ling “A manager cannot empower their people if they are not empowered themselves.

Leadership by Behaviour

The company is led by Chief Executive Jeremy Ling. He joined Bristan Group in 2009 when it was a family-owned “can do” company but with “a lack of clear focus and inconsistent objectives”. Although the company has retained its family atmosphere Jeremy’s arrival was transformative. Continuous improvement now lies at the heart of the company’s vision and Jeremy describes Bristan Group as “always moving forward”.

Leading by example, Jeremy has created a culture of shared leadership, values and behaviours: “empowerment of my top team and feedback on performance are essential for us to be a learning organisation”. He and his senior team are guided by “boundaries” rather than strict role definitions, and are trusted and empowered to be entrepreneurial within those boundaries. Jeremy points out that all employees have two duties: to develop themselves and to change and develop their roles.

One employee summed up Jeremy's leadership: "This senior management team are the best ever, they know all our names." Jeremy is passionate about bringing his people with him. He holds a "Big Briefing", a quarterly meeting to keep everyone aware of company progress, results and updates, where employees ask questions and give feedback. Everyone attends in prearranged hourly slots and are encouraged to send Jeremy emails on the topic he presents.

Bristan Group believes that line managers drive the organisation and they take their own decisions about how to lead their teams. Self-managed team-working is an important part of Bristan Group's culture of non-hierarchical behaviour. Teams are empowered to address issues from customers directly, working within boundaries set to give room for entrepreneurial behaviour. Open plan offices and working groups enable cross functional collaboration throughout the company, and job swaps provide opportunities to work in different areas and support career progression.

Training, skills development, apprenticeships and career progression are a priority for Jeremy, and the majority of the senior team have been promoted from within the company. *Leadership by Behaviour* training is cascaded from the senior team to all managers.

Employees value the company's commitment to their learning. Individual development goals, learning needs and SMART objectives are discussed at conversational one to one meetings with line managers each month, which together with mid-year reviews lead to a "no surprise" year-end appraisal.

"Our success is in our people"

The senior team makes sure that everyone works within Bristan Group's SHINE values - **S**traightforward, **H**elpful, **I**nnovation, **N**o Limits to Customer Service and **E**mpower and Engage. At the end of the year, the company holds an awards ceremony where the SHINE Star of the Year is named.

Continuous improvement (CI) is part of the everyday vocabulary at every level. CI champions organise improvement projects and teams organise cross-functional working groups involving people from all areas of the company to improve the way they work. At the time of interview there were 146 CI initiatives in progress, each based on an opportunity identified by an employee. Bringing people together from different parts of the company enables problems to be seen "with a fresh pair of eyes." Every employee is also encouraged to sign up for a Kaizen project, taking time out for a week to join a cross-functional team. Between four and six Kaizen events are held every year and outcomes are presented to the senior team as an important means of learning, engagement and networking.

A warehouse led "fast despatch" group recruited from across the company met for a week and reviewed the despatches – cutting 7.5 miles of walking per week. Everyone in the warehouse is involved in continuously improving the integration of technology for "Just in Time" with their team working practices and USP of "next day delivery". The warehouse people rotate their roles and tasks regularly, but individuals can self-organise if they want to stay to complete something.

An Employee Forum offers further opportunities to discuss issues or ideas for improvement. Thirteen Employee Representatives are nominated by their peers and attend four formal meetings a year with a member of senior management team. The Forum help run 'PeopleFest' which is an annual event encompassing sessions on well-being, career, financial and health advice, cycle to work, benefits, discount vouchers and child care information. The Forum is given a budget to organise the annual family open day which is the climax to PeopleFest.

Trust and open communication are reflected in the employee survey with an 89% return rate. Managers reflect on what to do differently based on survey results. As part of their action plan they write individual 'I promise to...' commitments on the Management Pledge Board in the canteen.

Who benefits?

Open leadership, communication and trust have enabled Bristan Group to undertake a potentially difficult 'journey of efficiencies' with a reduction in overall staff numbers and the closure of sites, while retaining high levels of staff engagement. Profits have risen as a result of these actions and employees have gained yearly pay rises and even bonuses throughout the recession. Employees are kept fully informed of plans to expand and are upbeat about the future: "Bristan Group are investing in their people so people will stay - those who leave come back." "Keep the same values, work hard but have fun when you are doing it."