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ConocoPhillips Canada took on a different approach to making performance breakthroughs. VP of HR, Judy Walton describes what they did and how it worked.

Give us a perspective on your business.

It's a moving target because the company has changed continuously over the last 10 or 12 years. Currently we are ConocoPhillips Canada – part of ConocoPhillips Oil and Gas, which is headquartered in Houston and has an employee population of about 56,000. The company is the result of a merger between Conoco and Phillips just over a year ago; less than a year prior to that Gulf Canada had been acquired by Conoco; and less than a year before that Gulf Canada Resources had acquired Crestar Energy.

In the backdrop to all this activity there had been ongoing conversation about performance, operational excellence and our ability to achieve outstanding financial results. It was in that context that our CEO happened to have a conversation with a JMW consultant on a plane. They talked about the challenges of engaging the entire organization to achieve particular performance targets and elevating the capabilities of all employees. From that conversation we developed a relationship with JMW as a provider of consulting on performance breakthroughs. That was supplemented by a leadership development component that was based on the same tools and principles, including powerful distinctions in language, which is a key part of their particular technology.

What specifically did you do to get a performance breakthrough?

First we had a series of meetings. The most senior managers talked to the next most senior about their commitment to the company, about looking at the business in a new way, and about taking some fairly drastic measures to improve our ability to produce results, and so on down the hierarchy. As outcomes to the meetings, teams and individuals committed to very specific actions and timeframes in order to progress a particular target. Internal discipline and accountability became more imbedded in the environment.

So it started at a very senior level. It was a call to action, and the senior leadership demonstrated their support through their participation in the process. It wasn't one of those typical experiences where the executives decide that this is a good thing for everyone else while they watch from the sidelines.

There were other processes we ran in parallel to help everyone get a grounding in JMW's ideas. It was really just about looking at some fundamental things in a different way.

So these work shops introduced some new ideas and you worked through what that meant for your business.

That's right, and the senior leadership's support was not just a short-term commitment. We were committed to producing substantially better performance than we had been able to previously. The shortfalls in the past were not due to a lack of effort. Clarity, focus, commitment and engagement were the ingredients that would make the difference. These things would help people understand what was most important and get past any and all obstacles to achieve the most critical goals.

One reason we used consultants is that the intervention was intended to build some sustainable capabilities, not just deal with a current issue. We hoped for, and to some extent have achieved, the ability to continue to get breakthroughs in performance beyond the initial challenge. The process altered our thinking of how we related to goals and targets, how we related to problems and challenges, and how we related to learning.

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How did the top team feel coming out of those first few meetings?

It was tough at first. It was valuable to begin the dialogue, but there was a fairly significant level of frustration because people felt like they had already been working on the problems being discussed. Unfortunately, their efforts to that point just weren't producing the breakthrough we were looking for. The turning point occurred when a team of senior managers went back to the CEO and said the targets they'd been given weren't challenging enough; they thought they could get the organization to do even more. He was astounded because that had never happened before. Typically the dynamic is that executives set the targets and the organization tells them why they can't be achieved.

The energy and momentum that was generated through the process gave everyone a new sense of ownership about what contribution they could make to increasing production, reducing cost or improving processes. It was remarkable to see the level of engagement and enthusiasm. The results we achieved were a stretch relative to where we had been. Also, it was almost as though the organization took it on, not just because of the potential of a big bonus, but because of the sense of achievement. The lasting benefit to the organization was a real sense of satisfaction and pride.

How would you compare it to other performance enhancement initiatives you've been involved in?

I would distinguish it in a couple of ways. One was the length of the commitment. It wasn't just a quick training program that applied to only a piece of the organization; it became an underpinning for a philosophical commitment to performance and results. Secondly, I'd seen a lot of simple techniques, as opposed to powerful ways of having individuals internalize stuff so that they could re-generate their relationship to a challenge every time one came up. A third distinction was the holistic nature of the undertaking. Having the executive management in training and performance coaching on targets all taking place concurrently was unusual in my experience.

What was the duration of the program?

The first one was 18 months at Gulf Canada. We committed to not developing an ongoing dependency on JMW because we didn't believe that was good for us as an organization. Then we acquired Crestar Energy and, given some of the challenges of the merger, we thought it would be useful to have JMW come back and give some grounding in the ideas to the people in Crestar. As I described earlier we'd only gotten a little way down that road when there was the Conoco-Phillips merger, so it is not as tidy a story as the first because the players changed.

How was the program accepted in the second intervention?

We found it more difficult to neatly define the performance challenges because with the Conoco and Phillips involvement we became part of a much larger global entity. Suddenly we had to take into account people from other locations that hadn't been part of our project. However, in terms of a lasting impact, all executive team members have had exposure to JMW training and we continue to use the tools and principles they taught us, notably the distinctions in language. Language seems like such a simple thing but it's one of the breakdowns that most frequently triggers performance problems. Lack of clarity in language causes people to misunderstand targets, deliverables, and accountabilities, so language is a fundamental thing and critical in an organization's ability to deliver on commitments.

Can you summarize your view of this approach to performance improvement?

It's an undertaking that has the potential to create a powerful change in an organization's ability to produce dramatic results. However, it does require a significant commitment and a willingness to stay the course in spite of inevitable challenges. In any business things are going to come up that you hadn't anticipated, and one of the tests will be whether a particular change initiative has the flexibility and durability to apply in spite of changing circumstances.

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Judy Walton, Vice President of Human Resources

Judy Walton has been Vice President, Human Resources for ConocoPhillips Canada since February 2002. Originally from Calgary, Alberta, Ms. Walton began her career with Gulf Canada in 1981 and was instrumental in leading several significant reorganizations including Gulf's acquisition of Crestar Energy and the sale of Gulf Canada to Conoco.

She has extensive experience within the areas of Pension and Benefits, Recruiting, Compensation, Training and Organizational Development. Ms. Walton graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Psychology, and a Human Resources Certificate from the University of Calgary.

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