

2019 Rob Goffee Leadership Development Award

WINNER: sportsmed

sportsmed united

Origins and principles

sportsmed is an industry leading healthcare provider with a private orthopaedic hospital and specialist clinics across a number of locations, offering patients access to modern and innovative healthcare in state-of-the-art facilities. sportsmed specialise in preventative care, treatment and rehabilitation for a range of ailments, injuries and conditions.

sportsmed found teams were working in silos rather than in teams. The surgeons (who are the owner/operators) were influencing a certain culture and this was inconsistent with the culture the Executive Management (EM) team was trying to create. The focus was on outcomes and not on building relationships within the organisation. Some members of the EM team left the organisation in search of an organisation whose values were more aligned with theirs. Morale was low, there was distrust among the EM team, staff and the surgeon group and this was impacting business both financially and morally.

The challenge was that EM team and the surgeons were not working together as effectively as they could on delivering the organisation's strategy, which among other things included growth, success and culture. The reason for this was due to the EM team considering culture and staff engagement to be equally as important as delivering best patient care and of course profits. It was understood that to succeed in a highly competitive market, sportsmed needed high profits, but this should not come at the expense of treating staff with respect and working together to achieve the end goal.

Unlike many other organisations, sportsmed are surgeon-owned and operated; the surgeons not only own the business, they work in the business and several of them make up the Board. The EM team in some cases are restricted in their ability to challenge a surgeon or hold them accountable for unproductive behaviours as there are no consequences. The CEO can hardly dismiss a surgeon when the surgeon owns the business.

sportsmed were experiencing a significant downturn in business, so there was much tension between the owners and the EM team. It is well known that when things get tough, the leaders need to work together and push through it. However, the opposite happened. The surgeons became very focussed on costs and this made staff feel unvalued.

The Head of People & Culture, together with the CEO held responsibility for leading cultural change. Their strategy had always been focused on 'the **way** we do things not **what** we do'. Surgeons and clinical staff are some of the best in their field from a technical aspect, so there needed to be something else that would make the organisation stand out from their competition. The EM team believed that building genuine relationships between the EM team, surgeons and employees would ultimately improve patient care and experience. In short, an approach of '*how* we behave was equally as important to *what* we do'. The surgeons needed to trust the EM team to drive the strategy of the business.

There is enough evidence to show that culture is created from the top and in sportsmed's situation, the most influential people are actually the owners of the business. The owners tend to focus on their individual practices and needs and not always on the organisation as a whole. . This is not a criticism; it is just the way surgeons are trained to be competitive and very good at technical skills. It is very much an individual career. If there was any chance of changing things, the surgeons needed to be on board.

Often the EM team would stand firm on a decision only to have it over-ruled by one of the owners because it did not suit their individual practice. Long-standing employees would go directly to a surgeon when not given their own way and rather than the surgeon advising the employee to speak directly with their manager, the surgeon would take on board the complaint, then 'suggest' a solution to the problem, regardless of whether the solution was best for the business.

The EM team decided there was a need to act and review the senior group, so external assistance was engaged to run a program with all the owners and the six members of the EM team. This would send a clear message to employees that the organisation was serious about changing the culture and becoming a truly high performing team.

Implementation

sportsmed partnered with Leading Teams to transform the 'way we 'do things' at sportsmed'. In order to be a high performing team and deliver best patient care, there needed to be greater emphasis on relationships rather than on the 'mechanics' of the business.

The initiative was based on the Leading Teams model which is built on observations of teams in the RAAF. While all teams in the RAAF received the same training, some performed better than others.

The model suggests that focusing on the 'dynamics' (culture, relationships, behaviour) of a business will have a direct and positive impact on the 'mechanics' (numbers, processes, KPI's) of the business. Having a 'common purpose', an 'agreed behavioural framework' and 'strong professional relationships' are the 3 elements to any high performing team.

The model was selected as sportsmed already had a strong focus on the 'mechanics' of business and whilst they believed they were working as a team, the fact was that they weren't. In fact, many of the surgeons saw each other as competitors, not joint owners of the business. There were little conversations had, plenty of three-way 'grumbles' and a level of distrust among the team. The main reason for this was that surgeons are trained to be competitive and the best in their field. Surgeons-in-training are not required to dedicate any time working on behaviours or relationships; almost 100% of their training is focused on the 'mechanics'.

What the EM team was asking of the surgeons was a big ask. They needed to let down their guard, show emotion and accept that behaving respectfully and honestly was just as important as being the best in their field. There was a need to convince the surgeons that it was not okay to undermine management decisions, it was not okay to behave inappropriately and it was okay for staff to call out poor or negative behaviour.

The group's first challenge was to identify the reason for their existence. They also needed to identify things that were being done well, things that were preventing them from doing well and things that could be changed in order to reach goals and vision. But what was the vision? This was a concern as sportsmed were not prepared for the varying answers and desires.

As a group the EM team and surgeons came up with a purpose for sportsmed's existence – what they wanted to be known for. They discarded long-standing values and developed a trademark, 'sportsmed united' and developed a behavioural framework (ABF). This was then communicated across almost 300 staff in order to gain buy in. Feedback was incorporated into the ABF until the whole organisation accepted the ABF and felt excited to be working in the organisation.

During the 18 months of working together as a group, the EM team and the surgeons broke into smaller groups, made disclosures about themselves and gave honest and sometimes difficult feedback. It was not easy. There were those that were 'on the bus', those that weren't sure and those that wanted to crash the bus. One of the hardest challenges was asking the surgeons to show vulnerability, share some of their private life with the group and commit to this new way of doing things.

Whilst the group sessions were conducted in a relatively safe environment, some of the group battled with their emotions. It was at times difficult for the group to see how developing relationships and having genuine conversations was going to improve profits, but to their credit the surgeons maintained their commitment, and many changed throughout the program.

After 18 months, the initiative was rolled out to all front-line leaders – approximately 40 staff. Whilst the sessions were slightly different to the surgeon sessions, the same models were unpacked, and the leaders were given tools to assist them in identifying their own style of leadership, the importance of relationships and skills in conducting a genuine conversation.

The initiative has confirmed that sportsmed is a unique business. The surgeons wear many hats and at times it is difficult to let go and allow management to manage. The business was started 30 years ago and is an icon in South Australia. There are not many people in the state who have not been a patient or know someone who has. The success of the business was built on the medical skills of the doctors and dedicated staff whose loyalty lay with the surgeon. . But times have changed. You cannot successfully conduct business without respecting and genuinely valuing the people who make it happen. Treat your staff and colleagues well and your business will flourish.

Benefits and Outcomes

The initiative is an ongoing process. It has improved relationships between the surgeons and staff and employees feel empowered to challenge surgeons. Teamwork is tested when times are tough and this is where the power of strong relationships come to the fore.

sportsmed understand that a cultural transformation can take several years to truly see the changes. This initiative has been in place for two years, so it is still a work in progress. Employees have noted a subtle change in surgeon behaviour and are growing more confident in their ability to challenge an action or behaviour that is not within the ABF.

The surgeons have engaged with each other and openly discuss cases and ask for medical advice from each other. There has been a change in exchanging of clinical skills whereby surgeons are invited to attend surgical procedures in theatres other than their own which has not only improved patient care but also improved the morale within theatres.

The journey began with never forgetting that the patient is at the core of every business decision sportsmed make. The program's claim that focusing on the dynamics of the business and not on 'what' you do would improve performance and productivity has delivered in many ways, but none so compelling as the results from the Medibank Private Patient Experience Survey. The survey started in 2016, collects data from approximately 30,000 members to compare private and public hospitals of similar size to understand what their customers liked and disliked about their care.

The most recent results published by the health fund show the sportsmed hospital scored 100% when asked how likely they were to refer them hospital to family or friends and 9.5/10 for the overall experience. sportsmed feel that the initiative has played a big part in this achievement.

Summary

In 2017 sportsmed surgeons and the executive management (EM) team recognised that to be a high performing team they needed to take an honest look at the culture, the relationships and commit to change. The basis of the transformation was focused on developing genuine relationships, agreeing on a behavioural framework and holding people at all levels accountable.