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Mike Sonley, UK Learning & Development Manager, ABB

## ABB equips managers with leadership instinct

### The challenge

To help it achieve its ambitious growth plans for its multi-million pound Power System division, ABB embarked on an innovative development programme. This has delivered significant benefits by getting its managers to instinctively think and act like leaders...

Mike Sonley, UK learning and development manager for ABB, explains, “ABB employs 140,000 people across the globe. Our UK Power Systems Division is responsible for multi-million pound energy construction projects, such as new substations and renewable energy converter stations. Historically, we have enjoyed considerable success through preferred supplier arrangements with key customers that guaranteed a constant flow of new projects. But delays within the complex supply chains we have to manage combined with new approaches by our customers meant there was a risk of this flow slowing down which would have had a big impact on our business.”

He adds, “At the same time a new business division set up to address new markets was taking time to convert the opportunities it was presented with, so we remained dependent on existing clients. The company had to raise its game, and this required our managers to show the leadership to take ownership of challenging projects.”

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### The approach

“After meeting with the division leaders and HR managers to look at where the business was currently experiencing challenges, we were able to define clear business measures for the improvement initiative to address,” says Mike. “It had to improve customer satisfaction, employee engagement and overall revenue.”

Focus group work with senior managers then gave rise to the Leadership Principles Model: a set of transformational leadership principles for encouraging greater *responsibility*, *respect* and *determination* amongst managers as a first step to more effective teamwork and, ultimately, improved performance against the desired business objectives. “Rather than trying to prescribe ‘behaviours’, we went beyond this, by focusing on ‘principles’, to encourage managers to instinctively adopt and naturally ‘live’ the Leadership Principles,” explains Mike. “Hunter Roberts, our ‘best-in-breed’ people development partner, was then appointed to create a learning and development programme to develop all managers in the business to think and act in the new ways required.”

## The solution

“Hunter Roberts worked in partnership with us, consistently adding value to develop a high impact Leadership for Managers development programme,” says Mike.

The multi-phase programme consisted of the following three phases and used world-class leadership theory:

1. **Engaging Phase:** to give managers a ‘current reality’ of the extent to which they were currently living the Leadership Principles, via 360-degree feedback, psychometric personality profiling, guided self-reflection and reviews with their line manager and with HR.
2. **Equipping Phase:** featuring a two-day workshop, jointly led by Hunter Roberts and ABB managers, which presented very simple and accessible best practice content on the mindset of a leader and core leadership skills, such as motivating, influencing and being assertive. Application practice used role-play exercises with professional actors and coaches.
3. **Embedding Phase:** managers are encouraged to continue their development by working in action-based trios, introducing an element of peer pressure to get them to carry out action-based learning on live business issues to embed their application of the leadership principles. Nine months after the development event, the 360-degree assessment is carried out again to assess how well managers have adopted the principles.

## The results

“The development programme has completely transformed the division and is now being rolled out across two other business areas,” says Mike. “Managers are fully living the values of responsibility, respect and determination, helping win new contracts and safeguard existing income.”

He adds, “By giving our new business team the extra drive and determination they needed, the initiative has enabled us to win work in new markets and to double the value of orders secured year-on-year. Overall, by developing our managers to instinctively think like leaders, Hunter Roberts has enabled us to measurably improve revenue, profitability and customer satisfaction.”

He concludes, “Internally, morale and teamwork have improved. Everyone is talking enthusiastically about the Leadership Principles and continuing to work in their action-based trios to address real business issues.”

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