

A POSITIVE JOURNEY THROUGH CRISIS

Global insurance giant, Aviva, spotted an opportunity to broaden their asset manager Aviva Investors' (AI) remit to include third party funds, in order to generate significant profits for clients and the parent company. With the aim of growing it into a multi £ billion asset manager, they bought up boutique companies around the globe to accelerate its growth and global footprint before formally launching in 2008. Just two weeks later, the investment and plans were thrown up in the air with the financial crisis kicked off by the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

Nigel Clemson, former HR Director of Aviva Investors, shares how Relume supported both the business, and him personally, to work through this crisis and find the positive in what otherwise may have been a career-destroying moment.

AS A COMPANY, YOU WERE FACING A CRISIS. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE MAIN CHALLENGES THAT YOU WERE ABOUT TO FACE?

For the creation of Aviva Investors, we had been brought in as new Board members. Some came from Aviva, and others from the boutique companies that had been acquired. So when the crisis hit, we were a new team. We had to find a way to gel very quickly to be effective in this crisis situation and steer the new company in the right direction.

“Our new company’s investments and plans were totally thrown up into the air just two weeks after launch because of the crash of Lehman Brothers and the subsequent financial collapse”.



Due to the massive investment that had already been made prior to the launch of the company, we had very stretching goals which, with the economy plummeting, there was no hope of getting anywhere near them. Failure was systemically built in due to what had happened. A third of our value had been wiped out in one moment.

SO WHY DID YOU BRING IN RELUME TO HELP AND WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE THEM?

As you can imagine, this was an incredibly stressful time for all of us on the Board. We had done a self-diagnosis and realised that our own perception of us as a team was that we were becoming fractured and unable to make clear choices. We needed to be decisive and united in order to be able to move forward. There was clear recognition that we needed to change and we needed support to do so. We decided that the best way would be executive coaching – as individuals and as a team. We also knew that we needed to work with coaches who would be able to provide us with a safe haven or safety valve to help with our stress.

As HR Director at BT, I had done a lot of work on the concept of being a challenger and knew that Relume focused on this, so I invited them to pitch to us. I specifically asked them to be authentic in the way they approached the brief – not to try to fit the corporate model but be the way that I knew they were.

The most significant difference about Relume is that they are focused on the long-term partnership. Big players have a shiny standard product on the shelf they use for everyone. Relume customise their approach to your need. The second big difference is that in their pitch they said “We will be very honest with you and if we think that your strategy is wrong or you are being prima-donnas – we will tell you!” None of the other consultancies that pitched spoke like that. We knew Relume were not going to pull punches and so were unanimous in our decision to go with them.

“I felt that I personally, and the company, went on a journey with Relume – one of self-exploration and discovery which led to greater level of understanding and personal growth. It equipped us with tools, not just for business challenges, but for life”.

DID RELUME DELIVER ON WHAT YOU COMMISSIONED THEM TO DO?

I was very keen that Aviva Investors had values and behaviours, which were lived throughout the organisation. Therefore, a main part of the brief was to carry out a values-led coaching programme.

The coaching started and it was apparent that there were a lot of issues around our relationship with the parent company, about relationships within the Executive Team,



and what strategy we needed to create to move forward. With the individual coaching, working through and understanding these issues became the focus and the values-led element became lost.

So, no – Relume did not deliver on the outcomes I commissioned them for. However, and perhaps more importantly, what they were doing was opening up people to new ways of thinking and being via the coaching. I did meet with Relume at this point, and we both accepted that the work had not gone the way that we had planned at the start – but we also agreed that there was immense value in the work that was being done.

Choosing Relume turned out to be a smart choice because they focused on how we could redefine relationships with our parent company when we knew that the parent company was not going to welcome the planned results. They helped us with how we should frame that relationship and how we think about our own roles, so that we did not feel that we had failed.

We originally commissioned coaching for six months but two things happened. People came to value it so much that we extended it beyond the original remit. Second, we made the decision that it would be useful to have a Relume member as our 'Board coach', attending our board meetings, so that they would continue to monitor how we performed collectively.

WHAT WAS SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE INTERVENTIONS THAT RELUME DELIVERED?

I have had many other executive coaches and lots of them use psychometrics to understand motivators and put you in boxes. Relume don't do any of that. What they do is have deep conversations with you. They listen and ask probing questions. They give you little nudges, which then make you contemplative about your own behaviours and reflect on whether or not that was a successful strategy/ decision to help you move forward. It is a very real approach to coaching.

I often describe Relume as a safe pair of hands. Like when you hold a butterfly – strong support but without damaging it.

“We didn't want to fall into the trap of putting specific measures on the coaching. Relume defined success as a feeling - we would feel better equipped to deal with the crisis, in a better place, with better relationships. In this respect the intervention was a resounding success”.

“The coaching with Relume was challenging without being uncomfortable. This isn't about knocking you down to build you up. It's a supportive journey”.



DESPITE THE OUTCOMES SHIFTING FROM WHAT YOU HAD ORIGINALLY SPECIFIED, RELUME MADE A POSITIVE IMPACT. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED?

As an individual, it did wonders for my self-belief and confidence. They got me to believe in myself again.

As a team there was a definite improvement in working relationships. There was a much greater understanding and willingness to work together and listen. This doesn't mean that there was never any conflict, it just meant it flared down quicker; finding solutions rather than holding grudges.

As you know, the markets didn't pick up. We continued to miss targets and eventually the parent company decided to make changes, which resulted in most of the Board leaving. I think the experience and coaching helped each individual cope with that change much better and not see it as a failure; Relume were able to show us we were better than we thought we were - individually and collectively. Those supportive messages helped people transition into new roles in new organisations much easier.

So while the end result wasn't what we were aiming for, without their help it would have been a lot more painful and damaging.

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